

# Conspiracies and Secret Societies in Interwar French Literature

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes the central place that representations of secret societies and conspiracies occupied in literature in France in between the two World Wars, reappearing in various guises in works by authors across aesthetic and ideological traditions. My examination situates these literary representations within their political and social context, demonstrating that the instability of the French Third Republic created an atmosphere that contributed to a proliferation of conspiracy theories targeting every faction imaginable, from right-wing and leftist groups to Freemasons, Jesuits, and Jews. Serving as both the subject of fictional works and the object of critical study, the figure of the secret society allowed authors to position themselves and their texts within this context of uncertainty and suspicion. The representation of conspiracies and secret societies permitted authors as varied as Jules Romains, André Malraux, Céline, and Paul Nizan to participate in and shape a widespread reevaluation of the political order by critiquing a dysfunctional system of parliamentary democracy and highlighting the cultural tensions of the day. My thesis does not just read these texts as reflections of larger political and cultural debates; it argues that secret societies and conspiracies served a specific literary function, particularly concerning the evolution of the avant-garde and the ideological novel in the interwar years. The invocation of these groups provided a charged metaphor for defining literary techniques and concerns of audience, genre, and language; and their representation helped shape the form and practice of interwar literature. I show, ultimately, how conspiracies and secret societies in literature participated in a larger discourse of fear and

suspicion that heralded the decline of the avant-garde, the rise of the committed novel, and a growing literary interest in politics, ethnology, and sociology.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1922 the novelist and journalist Henri Béraud had the rare honor of being awarded the Prix Goncourt in recognition of not one but two novels published over the course of the previous year: *Martyre de l'obèse* and *Vitriol de lune*. Of the two, *Martyre de l'obèse* has proven to be the more enduring, its tale of the amorous difficulties of the titular overweight main character anticipating modern-day obsessions with weight. *Vitriol de lune* is a novel of an entirely different sort: a historical tale set in the reign of Louis XV, the book recounts in sensationalistic and suspenseful fashion the failed assassination attempt on the king by the servant Damiens, whose execution made him the last victim by drawing and quartering in France, a death that would go on to garner much historical notoriety, eventually serving as the centerpiece of Michel Foucault's introduction to *Surveiller et punir*. While the novel certainly dwells in lurid and anatomical detail on the execution, the main drama concerns the preparation and aftermath of the assassination attempt, portrayed in the text as a plot orchestrated by the Jesuits. Operating out of a secret residence, a group of Jesuits hopes that the attack on the king will be just the first step of what one of their members refers to as the "grand dessein que l'Eglise poursuit... un dessein secret."<sup>1</sup> Their goal is to turn France away from the moral decline into which Louis's reign has led it, but the head cleric makes it clear that their goal does not stop with the French court: "Le P. Etapier assignait à la Société de Jésus de plus amples destinées; il la voyait, dans l'avenir, maîtresse du monde, dominant les trônes, tenant tête, s'il le fallait, au Vatican!" (65). In his fantasy of overturning royal houses and catholicizing England, Etapier hopes to finally fulfill "le vieux rêve jésuite, transporté, par un tour adroit, au plan d'une politique guerrière" (66). Thus the attack on the king becomes the opening salvo in a vast, far-reaching conspiracy: an all-out war against the social order in the hopes of establishing the Jesuits as the rulers of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Béraud, *Vitriol de lune* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1921), 53. Subsequent citations given parenthetically.

Despite the stamp of approval of the Prix Goncourt, literary history has not been particularly kind to *Vitriol de lune*, perhaps in part due to its conventionality. While attentive to historical detail, particularly with regard to its depiction of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Lyon, the novel uses, without much innovation, many of the standard devices of the adventure novel: mysterious figures, shadowy spaces, and surprising, often violent, turns of fortune.<sup>2</sup> Even its conspiratorial tone bears the heavy-handed weight of its predecessors, with Béraud reproducing the portrait of the rapacious and calculating Jesuit that Eugène Sue had perfected in his 1844 bestseller *Le Juif errant*. But *Vitriol de lune* and Béraud himself have also suffered a poor fate due to its author's activities in the years following its publication. In addition to his career as a novelist, Béraud gained a certain amount of fame in France as a journalist, often offering cultural and travel reports for a variety of newspapers. Around the time of the Goncourt honor, he made his mark by polemicizing against the *Nouvelle revue française* and its founder, André Gide: in a series of interviews in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* in 1923, he accused protestant, homosexual, and bourgeois writers at the *NRF* of being an elitist, snobbish closed circle. Through a populist and anti-intellectual rhetoric, Béraud attacked his literary peers on moral and aesthetic grounds, arguing that their continued success was a denigration of "le génie français."<sup>3</sup>

By early 1934 this polemical side to Béraud's writing became expressly political, when he assumed a new position at the newspaper *Gringoire*, abandoning his role as reporter-at-large for that of editorialist. There he presided until 1943, regularly publishing editorials that took on an increasingly hostile attitude toward the perceived enemies of France, namely England,

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<sup>2</sup> Frédéric Monier remarks that "il n'y a rien, dans cette fiction, que de très conventionnel (dans tous les sens du terme)." See his *Complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 147.

<sup>3</sup> See Gisèle Sapiro's *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 127-132.



communists, and Jews.<sup>4</sup> Béraud's broadsides against Jews would recall the conspiratorial narrative at work in *Vitriol de lune*, with his attacks against a vast Jewish-communist plot trafficking in the same conspiratorial conventions as his anti-Jesuit critique several years prior. In editorials against Léon Blum's Popular Front government, Béraud published lists of names of Jewish politicians, implying that the socialist prime minister was the face of a revolutionary Jewish plot against France. The French defeat at the hands of Nazi invaders only strengthened Béraud's conspiratorial worldview: in a 1941 editorial, the military collapse of France is laid at the feet of "le rôle anglo-maçonnique de la haute juiverie internationale."<sup>5</sup> By the time of the Liberation, Béraud's polemics in favor of collaboration with the Nazi occupiers had sealed his fate: he was arrested and convicted for intelligence with the enemy, resulting in a death sentence that was ultimately commuted to life imprisonment.

Despite his relative lack of aesthetic originality and literary stature, Henri Béraud's case represents in many ways the strange history of the conspiracy theory in literature over the interwar period in France. What could be considered in 1921 the rather conventional part of an adventure tale, largely divorced from the political concerns or reality of its time, had by the mid-1930s become a powerful vision of the ideological, economic, and cultural troubles facing France, a viewpoint that in turn became part of an official narrative contributing to the death of over six million victims. At the same time, Béraud's case exemplifies the traditional classifications of narratives of conspiracy, normally seen as either belonging to the domain of genre fiction or political polemic, what today we might consider the difference between Dan

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<sup>4</sup> On Béraud's life and career, see Jean Butin's biography, *Henri Béraud* (Roanne: Horvath, 1979). Frédéric Monier has traced the evolution of anti-Semitism in Béraud's journalistic career, demonstrating that he became increasingly overt over the final years of 1930s. See Monier's "Les Obsessions d'Henri Béraud," *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire* 40 (October-December 1993), 62-74.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Monier in "Les Obsessions d'Henri Béraud," 73.

Brown's airport bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* and accusations by "birthers" that Barack Obama was, in fact, born on foreign soil. Yet the literature of the interwar period belies such an easy classification, as representations of secret societies and conspiracies abound in works across ideological and aesthetic traditions, reappearing in various guises in works that resist the labels of "low" or "popular" literature and discourse. Writers as diverse and as canonical as Proust and Gide, Jules Romains and André Breton, Malraux and Céline, all invoked in various works the figure of the conspiratorial group in its assorted manifestations, from sexual secret societies and Freemasonry to capitalist and communist cabals and the Jewish plot. This veritable explosion of conspiracies and secret societies in French literature and culture from the 1920s and 1930s is all the more remarkable since it followed a period of quiet on the question of conspiracies: the relative stability of post-Dreyfus Affair France led to what the historian Frédéric Monier has called a "silence of the imaginary" of the conspiracy theory in France.<sup>6</sup> In this dissertation, I aim to analyze the resurgence of the figures of secret societies and conspiracies in interwar French literature, to understand why they proved to be such a seductive trope among writers of the era.

While cultural historians have established the prevalence of conspiracy theories and paranoid discourses in interwar politics, the literary side of the equation has yet to be explored to its fullest extent. One of the major contentions of my thesis is that the particular stature of literature in the interwar period created the conditions for addressing the literary representation of secret societies. These two decades in France witnessed the proliferation and ultimate decline of literary and artistic avant-garde movements whose strategies and techniques – the subversion of the institution of art, the insistence on secret languages, the reclamation of the occult or the hermetic – recall in many ways the practices of secret societies. I highlight how the model of the secret society is often explicitly invoked in debates over the avant-garde, serving as a rhetorical

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<sup>6</sup> Monier, *Complot dans la République*, chapter 7.

device to both praise the subversive goals of the avant-garde and condemn its practices as either too elite or too insular. This fascination with secret societies in the avant-garde coincided with the rise of ethnology and sociology, academic disciplines that attempted to establish a critical and theoretical language for analyzing and discussing these forms of social organization. The secret society provided the critical point of contact between the artistic avant-garde and the sociological domains with the formation of the Collège de Sociologie, a group founded by dissident surrealists at the end of the 1930s and which defined itself in opposition to surrealism through an embrace of science and by an explicit call to an intellectual conspiracy. By tracing the use of the secret society metaphor and model in avant-garde rhetoric from surrealism to the Collège de Sociologie, I demonstrate how conspiracies effectively functioned as a recurring shorthand for defining the collective practice of interwar avant-garde literature.

Beyond the question of the avant-garde, I contend that secret societies and conspiracies had an important role to play in the other main literary development of the interwar period, the rise of the political novel. The political jockeying of the time period translated into a literary and intellectual imperative to have literature involve itself in politics, to determine once and for all the role of the communist, fascist, or moderate writer in political as well as aesthetic terms. Critical reassessments of traditional literary concerns like language and audience correspondingly took on a particularly charged political value. Especially in the wake of the mass political movements of the mid-1930s, the elite model of literature, one that conceived of literature as a closed circle, was abandoned in favor of writing that was capable of speaking of and to the masses. With the rise of the socialist realist novel and the fascist novel in France, the articulation of the relationship of author to audience often occurred through a debate over secret societies and conspiracies.

In addition, the imperative of literature to explain the problems of the present moment entailed a commitment to the writing of history, frequently of the immediate pre-history. Representations of conspiracies prove appealing because they provide a form in which historical narratives can unfold, a version of history that inevitably has an ideological bend: history has been caused by Freemasons, Jesuits, or capitalists. In widely diverse novels, Jules Romains, Aragon, Paul Nizan, and Drieu la Rochelle all returned to the recent past in order to propose narratives explaining the failures of their own era. Conspiracies serve as a means of crafting historical narratives that clearly signal to their readers the ideological positioning of the author, in the hopes of motivating the reader to also join the struggle against the secret enemy. Secret societies and conspiracies in these novels serve as fundamental tools for articulating the relationship of literature to its audience and outlining a mission for the practice of literature. Their representation thus facilitated the intervention of authors from all ideological spectrums in political and cultural debates at a time of great unease and uncertainty.

### **The Secret History of the Nineteenth Century**

The literary preoccupation with secret societies and conspiracies did not, of course, originate in the interwar period, a point of which intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s were well aware. For example, to read two texts by the dissident surrealist Roger Caillois from the end of the 1930s, one might have the impression that the literary fascination with secret societies comes down to two names alone: Balzac and Baudelaire. In his 1938 essays “Paris, mythe moderne” (which serves as the centerpiece to the conclusion of his sociological study *Le Mythe et l'homme*) and “Le Vent d’hiver” (which appeared in the declaration of the founding of the avant-garde group the Collège de Sociologie published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*), Caillois highlights the interest that both authors expressed for the Jesuits and for Hassan i-Sabbah’s 11<sup>th</sup>-

century Assassin secret society. In Caillois's reading, the titular secret society of Balzac's *L'Histoire des Treize* (not to mention his first work, *Histoire impartiale des Jésuites*) and the new aristocracy that Baudelaire sees embodied by the dandy in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* represent two sides of the same coin: "cette arrière-pensée de la fondation d'un ordre monastique et militaire, réservé à l'élite, dispensé de la morale vulgaire, voué à la conquête par principe comme par instinct."<sup>7</sup> In Caillois's analysis, nineteenth-century Paris becomes the shadowy, protean monster that Balzac famously describes in the opening pages of *Ferragus*, the first novel of *L'Histoire des Treize*, a creature capable of devouring any and all who cross its path. Far from bearers of the Romantic poetic standard of refuge and escape, Baudelaire and Balzac are for Caillois the inaugurators of a myth of Paris, one of subterranean passages and criminal organizations, with the modern hero as a warrior figure at battle with the secret and mysterious urban landscape.

As Caillois suggests, Balzac's *L'Histoire des Treize* – comprising the novels *Ferragus* (1833), *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1833), and *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (1834) – exemplifies a profound fascination with the heroic combats of the urban warrior uncovering the hidden scenes of Parisian life.<sup>8</sup> The eponymous secret society, thirteen men bound together by mutual devotion and a common sense of purpose, represent a fraternity defined not by blood but by fidelity. The opening of Balzac's preface to the *Treize* stresses this shared sense of purpose:

Il s'est rencontré, sous l'Empire et dans Paris, treize hommes également frappés du même sentiment, tous doués d'une assez grande énergie pour être fidèle à la même pensée, assez

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 171.

<sup>8</sup> Balzac classified *L'Histoire des Treize* under the "Scènes de la vie parisienne" section of his *Comédie humaine*. Published in *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 5, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex and Rose Fortassier (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

probes entre eux pour ne point se trahir, alors même que leurs intérêts se trouvaient opposés.

Critics have suggested various historical inspirations for the Treize, from the Jesuits to the various revolutionary secret societies such as the Italian *carbonari* that populated early nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>9</sup> But if Balzac inscribes his secret society in a particular setting – Paris under the Empire – the group resists an easy ideological definition: they are bound together even though they have opposing interests. Instead of a political force working either for or against Napoleon’s empire, the Treize embody, as Félicien Marceau has described, a maxim of collective strength, the idea that the group can triumph where the singular individual fails.<sup>10</sup> The Treize work out of a common personal cause for one of their members – the devotion of Ferragus to his daughter, the abetting of the General de Montriveau in his quest to capture the Duchess of Langeais – with acts that demonstrate their collective power, efficiency, and dedication: the secret poisoning of a rival, a heroic escape from a prison. But the novels that make up *L’Histoire des Treize* never penetrate the inner workings of the secret society; the reader sees their effects, the violence and power that they wield, but always remains on the outside of the group. Just as Balzac’s Paris seems to hide innumerable secrets in its dark corners, so the Treize remain covered by a cloak of obscurity. The secret society here is not so much about history but about exploring what Félicien Marceau characterizes as “le mystique de l’effort concerté, la répartition des tâches, le secret.”<sup>11</sup>

Critics have tied Balzac’s portrayal of the group to the upheaval of traditional social markers in the wake of the Revolution, Empire, and Restoration: the recurrence of characters

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<sup>9</sup> See Rose Fortassier’s introduction to *L’Histoire des Treize*.

<sup>10</sup> Félicien Marceau, *Balzac et son monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 302.

<sup>11</sup> Marceau, *Balzac et son monde*, 305.

with multiple identities throughout *L'Histoire des Treize* exemplifies the dissolution of previously stable political and social reference points. Amid the individualism of the reign of the bourgeoisie, the secret society offers what Sarah Mombert terms an “alternative sociability,” one defined by choice and common cause, as opposed to blood or fortune.<sup>12</sup> While this sociability might be ideologically indeterminate, it nevertheless wields a fearsome power. The Treize revolt against an increasingly unjust and capricious society; their resistance to normal legal procedures of justice may make them criminals by Balzac’s own admission, but they find value in this act of rebellion. And, as Caillois argues, dandyism functions in a similar way for Baudelaire, who, in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), characterizes the dandy’s excessive rules of elegance and originality as an “étrange spiritualisme,” or “une espèce de religion.” The opposition of the dandy to the rest of society takes the form of exclusion through distinction and disdain, the common rule to which all dandies must submit, like an assassin or a Jesuit:

La règle monastique la plus rigoureuse, l’ordre irrésistible du *Vieux de la montagne*, qui commandait le suicide à ses disciples enivrés, n’étaient pas plus despotiques ni plus obéis que cette doctrine de l’élégance et de l’originalité, qui impose, elle aussi, à ses ambitieux et humbles sectaires, hommes souvent pleins de fougue, de passion, de courage, d’énergie contenue, la terrible formule: *Perinde ac cadaver!*<sup>13</sup>

Baudelaire’s reference to the assassin’s creed of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Old Man of the Mountain, used in conjunction with the concluding call to the rigid devotion in the Jesuit motto of “perinde ac cadaver” (“as a corpse”), signals his view of dandyism as a secret society of revolt against

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah Mombert, “L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine: Conjurations, complots, et sociétés secrètes, moteurs souterrains du récit Romanesque romantique,” in *Stendhal, Balzac, Dumas: Un récit romantique?*, eds. Lise Dumasy, Chantal Massol, Marie-Rose Corredor (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2006), 21-31. Raoul Girardet makes a similar claim in his *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 711.

bourgeois society.<sup>14</sup> Both Baudelaire and Balzac represent something of a start of a tradition that will emerge again in the interwar era, one that sees secret societies as objects of seduction due to the revolt and devotion they exemplify, as opposed to a source of fear.

Caillouis's sole focus on Balzac and Baudelaire as inaugurators of a particular literary tradition might give his reader a distorted vision of what was in reality a century plagued by fears of conspiracies, a period that has led one critic to deem it a "golden age of conspiracies."<sup>15</sup> Cultural historians tend to argue that the modern conspiracy theory was established in France in the aftermath of the Revolution, when the Jesuit priest Augustin de Barruel published his multivolume history of the Jacobin regime, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (1797), in which he argued that the French monarchy had been overthrown not by an uprising on the part of the masses but by a plot orchestrated by Masonic lodges that had been infiltrated by Illuminati.<sup>16</sup> Clearly hostile to the anti-religious laws put into place by the Jacobins, Barruel describes how their policies were in fact the product of a vast plot whose history extends back to the beginning of the eighteenth century. Or, to be more precise, three vast plots: one targeting the Church (what Barruel calls the conspiracy of the "sophistes de l'Impiété"), one against the monarchy (the conspiracy of the "sophistes de l'Impiété et de la Rébellion), and one that threatens all civil society (the conspiracy of the "sophistes de l'Impiété et de l'Anarchie"):

La première de ces Conspirations fut celle de ces hommes appelés Philosophes. La seconde, celle des Philosophes réunis aux Arrière-Loges des Franc-maçons. La

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<sup>14</sup> For a reading of Baudelaire's politics in which the conspiracy figures as a dream of human connection, see Pierre Pachet's *Le Premier venu: Essai sur la politique baudelairienne* (Paris: Denoël, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> On the history of the myth of the Illuminati-Masonic plot, see Pierre André Taguieff, *La Foire aux Illuminés: Esotérisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2005). On Barruel, see John M. Roberts, *The Mythology of Secret Societies* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 188-197.



troisième, celle des Philosophes et des Arrière-Maçons réunis aux Illuminés. La coalition des Philosophes, des Arrière-Maçons, et des Illuminés forma les Jacobins.<sup>17</sup>

Barruel's argumentation and approach set a model of conspiratorial discourse that continues to be adopted today. He grounds his theory at least partially in reality: the Freemasons and Bavarian Illuminati were real secret societies that historically had promulgated Enlightenment-era ideals of freedom of thought and reason.<sup>18</sup> But rather than see them as participants in a popular, pan-European anti-monarchist movement, Barruel targets them as a secret force behind European tumult. The Jacobins are merely the façade of history, a front for the union of philosophes, Masons, and Illuminati. Barruel's text established certain key elements of conspiratorial discourse, notably with regard to space: the triple conspiracy can be literally located in a secret domain, with the official Masonic lodges concealing the hidden back lodges where the plot was prepared. In addition, to gird against claims of falsification or imagination, Barruel asserts that his history is grounded in extensive textual proof, drawn from "des archives des Conjurés et des monumens [*sic*] les plus authentiques." The documentation is intended to demonstrate the extent of the conspiracy, one that might have already caused the French Revolution but which also threatens all civil societies everywhere.

Barruel's image of the Freemasons had a profound influence on the literary representation of this secret society over the course of the nineteenth century. In his novel *Joseph Balsamo* (1853), Alexandre Dumas focuses on the life of the title character, the alias of the Count di Cagliostro, a historical figure in eighteenth-century Masonry, who becomes in Dumas's narrative the agent of a vast international plot to bring down the French monarchy.

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<sup>17</sup> Augustin de Barruel, "Avant-Propos," *Abrégé des Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (London: Ph. Le Boussonnier, 1799).

<sup>18</sup> On the history of Freemasonry in France, see Pierre Chevallier, *Histoire de la Franc-Maçonnerie française*, 3 vols. (Paris: Fayard, 1974).

From the first scene of the novel, when Balsamo finds himself in the crypt of an abandoned German castle, pledging his fealty to a company of masked agents, Dumas portrays history as a mysterious plot of danger and intrigue. This scene seems to harken back to Barruel's insistence on the locations of the Masonic conspiracy: secret histories unfold in secret spaces. Using the trademark of the historical fiction genre, where fictional characters brush up against real-life figures in celebrated settings (including in this novel Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry), Dumas depicts the twenty years leading up to the French Revolution as the results of the machinations of Balsamo, while other historical players remain ignorant of the outcome. It is narrative where, in the words of Raoul Girardet, "la logique de la manipulation se voit substituée à l'imprévisibilité des accidents de l'histoire."<sup>19</sup>

While Dumas insists on the plotting of the Masons, the initiatory practices of this secret society, what were for Barruel the symbol of their occult power, form the centerpiece of George Sand's consideration of the group. In the late 1830s and 1840s, Sand became fascinated with Freemasonry, reading F.T.B. Clavel's recently published history of Freemasons, and was inspired by her own involvement in utopian political movements, a concurrence of interests that led to the writing of *Consuelo* (1842) and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (1844).<sup>20</sup> The novels recount the life of Consuelo, a gypsy girl who, in the years before the French Revolution, becomes a famous opera singer and countess, eventually becoming initiated into a secret society known as Les Invisibles, a group whose form, much like that of the Masons, depends upon an internal hierarchy, with members moving from one rank to the next through a deepening of

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<sup>19</sup> *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> On Sand's personal interest in Freemasonry, see René Doumic, *George Sand: Some Aspects of Her Life and Writings*, trans. Alys Hallard (London: Chapman and Hall, 1910), 213-216. On *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, see the essays collected in *Lectures de Consuelo – La Comtesse de Rudolstadt de George Sand*, eds. Michèle Hecquet and Christine Planté (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2004).

knowledge. Consuelo's story follows a series of personal tests and travels that anticipate her initiation into a secret society of knowledge, with the actual scene of initiation taking place over a good portion of the *Comtesse*.<sup>21</sup> Les Invisibles are represented as a parallel secret society to their Masonic counterparts, sharing a mutual platform of freedom and reason: Consuelo is meant to travel across Europe and spread the gospel of liberty, equality, and fraternity through song.

In many ways Sand's narratives represent an appropriation of Barruel's portrayal of the Freemasons: while insisting that they served as propagators of liberty in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, she resists the malevolent and destructive image that the Jesuit gave to the secret society. Within this context, Consuelo's gender comes to be a powerful signifier of the political dimension of the text: while a historical tradition of female Freemasons does exist, it is explained in the novel that the relative rarity of women in their ranks means that Consuelo can only be an "auxiliary member" to this secret society. Sand's portrayal of a female rite of initiation stands in stark contrast to most representations of secret societies: as we shall see in texts from the interwar period, these groups' action and efficiency is frequently tied in overt ways to an exclusively male membership. Consuelo's membership in Les Invisibles thus represents Sand's version of nineteenth-century political utopianism, one where the promise of sexual equality comes with the spreading of liberty through discourse and song rather than violence.

If Freemasonry served as the predominant conspiratorial myth originating from the French Revolution, by the mid-nineteenth century the Jesuit myth had supplanted it in both popular and literary discourse. Founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus had long generated fear from both the Church and the State for the discipline and devotion it demanded of its members, seen in the context of nineteenth century France as a

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<sup>21</sup> Consuelo's narrative of learning recalls in many respects Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. See chapter 4 of Kari Lokke, *Tracing Women's Romanticism: Gender, History, and Transcendence* (London: Routledge, 2004).

threat to the ideals of liberalism. If the Masonic myth had originated among its opponents on the right, the promulgators of the Jesuit myth came largely from the left, decrying the religious society's influence in French education as the basis of a secret plot to create a nation of automatons opposed to liberalism.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the best-known of these attacks occurred at the Collège de France in the late 1830s, when Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet famously targeted the Jesuits for their indoctrination of a spirit of machinism, a soulless obedience to the Church encapsulated by their motto *perinde ac cadaver*.<sup>23</sup> Literally meaning "in the manner of a corpse," the slogan traditionally refers to the abnegation of a Jesuit before his order and God, but in Michelet and Quinet's polemic, the cadaverous notion becomes a symbol of the death of French culture, overcome by a spiritual rigor mortis. But Michelet and Quinet's critique was not just against Jesuit philosophy; it also suggested that the Society of Jesus was a vast conspiracy that aimed to conquer France from within, working inside families to turn women and children away from a belief in the liberal ideals of liberty and equality.

While Michelet and Quinet's polemic represented the substantive articulation of the Jesuit myth, the popular image of the conspiratorial Jesuit is due above all to the overwhelming success of Eugène Sue's *Le Juif errant*, what Michel Leroy has called "le grand roman anti-jésuite de la monarchie de juillet."<sup>24</sup> Published in serial form in *Le Constitutionnel* in 1844 and 1845, Sue's novel recounts the internal drama of the members of the Rennepont family, who are scheduled to come together to inherit a fortune hidden for them in the seventeenth century by one of their ancestors. Having uncovered these plans, a group of Jesuits under the direction of the

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<sup>22</sup> See Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); and Michel Leroy, *Le Mythe jésuite: De Beranger à Michelet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Michelet and Quinet's Collège de France polemics were eventually published as *Des Jésuites* in 1840.

<sup>24</sup> *Le Mythe jésuite*, 294.

vicious Père Rodin are dispatched to prevent the transfer of wealth, using espionage, subterfuge, and trickery to erect obstacles in each family member's way. Through the surprises, cliffhangers, and mysteries typical of the serial roman, Sue portrays the Jesuit plot as one of suspense and violence, with the family members ignorant of the malevolent intentions of Rodin's henchmen.<sup>25</sup> The novel's focus on the family inheritance resonated with the popular image of the Jesuits as rapacious priests who used religion as a source of individual profit. As Geoffrey Cubitt argues, *Le Juif errant*'s enormous popularity helped cement the popular representation of the individual Jesuit as an agent of "Jesuitism," the conspiratorial urge at the heart of the society's theology; it is the image of the "perfect, poisonous automaton," the "symbol of social and political menace whose roots sank deep into the anxious side of post-Revolutionary liberalism."<sup>26</sup>

To a certain degree, the preoccupation with secret societies in literature from the nineteenth century reflected and explored the proliferation of conspiratorial organizations in Europe at the time, from the Italian republican *carbonari* portrayed in Stendhal's "Vanina Vanini" (originally published in 1829) or the occult Martinist and socialist Saint-Simonian movements that made literature part of their utopian programs.<sup>27</sup> But one common element between the novelists portraying both the Masonic and Jesuit plots in the first half of the nineteenth century is their use of the conventions of the serial novel. As Raoul Girardet suggests, the rise in conspiratorial myths in the nineteenth century responds in part to the desires

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<sup>25</sup> Cubitt characterizes the novel as a "crossbreeding of the conventions of the anti-Jesuit polemic with those of cloak-and-dagger fiction." See *The Jesuit Myth*, 121.

<sup>26</sup> *The Jesuit Myth*, 294.

<sup>27</sup> On carbonarism, see Pierre-Arnaud Lambert, *La Charbonnerie française 1821-1823: Du secret en politique* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1995). On Martinism and other occult movements in France, see David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005). On the Saint-Simonians, see Robert S. Carlisle, *The Proffered Crown: Saint-Simonianism and the Doctrine of Hope* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

of an audience already primed for the techniques of mystery, suspense, and reversal of fortune of the serial novel, what he calls “un public épris d’aventure et de sensationnel.”<sup>28</sup> In these novels, history and politics become stories of dramatic intrigue, articulating the narrative of a society in upheaval and searching out the hidden cause to events that escape comprehension. The use of the serial novel to explore these sources of mystery suggests a vision of a world full of secrets, but also one that ultimately reveals a logic of cause and effect: once the hidden force is revealed, the enigma of what has come before has been explained. But as Sarah Mombert argues, one of the particularities of these narratives is the way in which they always suggest more than they reveal, claiming that there are some stories that are impossible to write.<sup>29</sup> Thus Balzac explains in his preface to *L’Histoire des Treize* that there are only three stories of the *Treize* instead of thirteen because the others are too dramatic: “Quant aux autres drames de cette histoire, si féconde en drame, ils peuvent se conter entre onze heures et minuit; mais il est impossible de les écrire.”<sup>30</sup> The model of readership is ultimately one of dependence: the reader relies on the author to reveal what can be told, to initiate him into the occult world through the unfolding of the novel’s tales, providing the pleasure of uncovering the root causes of mystery.<sup>31</sup>

With the Masonic and the Jesuit myths, the boundaries between history and fiction often become blurry, as historical facts inform fictional representations that then influence a larger social imaginary targeting a particular group. The final major conspiracy theory of the nineteenth century, the fear of a Jewish plot, demonstrates just how porous the dividing lines between fact and fiction can become for conspiratorial narratives. In her classic analysis of the

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<sup>28</sup> Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Mombert, “L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine,” 30.

<sup>30</sup> Balzac, *L’Histoire des Treize*, 904.

<sup>31</sup> Mombert refers to this dependence as “une captatio benivolentia volontairement pleine de réticences.” See her “L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine,” 30.

rise of anti-Semitism in France, Hannah Arendt argues that the fear of a Jewish conspiracy arrived at the moment when Jews came to be seen as the symbol of the social ills confronting the Third Republic; the Jews' image as both pariah and parvenu marked them with a form of distrust and anxiety relating to both morality and politics. On the one hand, bourgeois society perceived Judaism's difference as a vice, encapsulated by the idea of "Jewishness," a vice that offered an escape from the ennui of *fin-de-siècle* France. In an account heavily influenced by her reading of Proust, Arendt argues that Jews and sexual inverts shared this image of immoral communities, representing in bourgeois culture distinct clans that seemed to harbor criminal or sinful intentions and that, like all criminal organizations, cultivated an air of mystery through the use secret signs.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the mob – as distinct from the bourgeoisie – came to see Jews as representatives of a state that had lost its authority through scandal and mismanagement. As Arendt argues, one of the ways in which the "mob" distinguishes itself from the "people" is in its targeting of any group perceived to be hidden behind the scenes; after the Masons and Jesuits, Jews became the third historical group deemed by the mob to be "the pivotal point of world politics."<sup>33</sup> The Dreyfus Affair represented the culmination of a mob politics of anxiety and fear, as nationalist leaders stirred up the masses in their attack on Captain Alfred Dreyfus. The falsified charges of treason and espionage brought against Dreyfus only seemed to confirm the image of the Jew as a member of the conspiracy of "Secret Judah" targeting France.<sup>34</sup>

Recent critical appraisals of the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe have demonstrated that Arendt's suggestion that fears of a Jewish plot arrived late in the century were not entirely

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<sup>32</sup> See chapter 3 of Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973).

<sup>33</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt's mentions of "secret Judah" (as well as its Dreyfusard counterpart "secret Rome") are taken from Daniel Halévy's memories of the Dreyfus Affair, *Apologie pour notre passé* (1910).

accurate.<sup>35</sup> While it is true that that fear did not come to the popular fore until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the accusation of a Jewish conspiracy was offered in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, when one reader of Barruel's *Mémoires*, a soldier named J.B. Simonini, wrote to the abbé to claim that the Masonic-Illuminati plot was, in fact, the work of "the Judaic sect."<sup>36</sup> Barruel had not mentioned the Jews in his conspiratorial vision of the French Revolution, but nevertheless circulated Simonini's letter in Jesuit circles, where it came to be regarded as a document of absolute authenticity. By midcentury, the myth of the "Judeo-Masonic plot" had begun to spread in right-wing and nationalist circles in France and across Europe: in one influential text, Henri Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux's *Le Juif, le judaïsme et la judaïsation des peuples chrétiens* (1869), Jews are presented as the "historical princes" of occultism, a tradition of which Masons are merely the modern incarnation.<sup>37</sup> As Pierre-André Taguieff notes, texts like Gougenot des Mousseaux's updated Barruel's argument by reproducing his theory that one conspiracy masks another: whereas Barruel distinguished between "loges" and "arrière-loges" as the visible and hidden sites of history, the Judeo-Masonic plot asserted that the known conspirators – Illuminati and Masons – in reality masked an even larger but unknown plot, led by the Jews and organized in temples.<sup>38</sup> This fear of a Jewish plot would eventually find its most popular representation in Edouard Drumont's bestselling *La*

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Pierre-André Taguieff, *Prêcheurs de haine: Traversée de la judéophobie planétaire* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2004), and Pierre Birnbaum, *Un mythe politique: La 'République juive'* (Paris: Fayard, 1988). Maurice Samuels approaches the question from the perspective of Jewish writers (as opposed to their anti-Semitic opponents) in *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> On Simonini and Barruel, see Norman Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 25-32.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Taguieff in *La Foire aux Illuminés*, 142. On the nineteenth-century fear of the Judeo-Masonic plot, see chapter 3 of *La Foire aux Illuminés* and Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide*, 32-40.

<sup>38</sup> *La Foire aux Illuminés*, 141-146.



*France juive* (1886), which postulated a long-standing occult tradition among Jews, enabled by the perceived status of the Jews as a state within a state in France.<sup>39</sup>

The cross-pollination of nineteenth-century conspiracy theories reached its culmination in one of the most infamous texts of the modern age, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, first published in Russia in 1903 by the mystic and writer Sergei Nilus. The *Protocols* purport to be the actual minutes from a secret meeting of rabbis held at the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, outlining a plot aiming to overthrow all the world's governments and religions in order to install an international Jewish empire. According to the plan laid out in the *Protocols*, liberalism and capitalism are used by the Jews to sow violent uprisings and socialist revolutions, eventually establishing a Jewish world order. The *Protocols* circulated throughout Europe and America in the first decades of the twentieth century and were soon the subject of investigative journalism by the London *Times* that proved them to be a massive forgery.<sup>40</sup> Far from being an authentic document, much of the text was a literal copy of "In the Jewish Cemetery at Prague," a chapter taken from the 1868 novel *Biarritz* by Sir John Retcliff, in actuality the pseudonym of the right-wing German journalist Hermann Goedsche. While Goedsche's novel was forgotten almost immediately upon publication, this particular chapter, which portrays a meeting of thirteen rabbis reporting on their malevolent plans to sow discord, was excerpted, altered, and reproduced as a pamphlet entitled "The Rabbi's Speech." Goedsche's own text had itself been clearly inspired, if not outright stolen, from the opening scene of Dumas's *Joseph Balsamo*, where the Comte di Cagliostro meets his Masonic superiors in a crypt in Bavaria. In other words, what was

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<sup>39</sup> On Drumont, see Michel Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 117-142.

<sup>40</sup> For the authoritative account of the history and circulation of the *Protocols*, see Norman Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). See as well chapter 1 of David Aaronovitch's *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 2010), and chapter 3 of Pierre-André Targuieff's *La Foire aux Illuminés: Esotérisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2005).

originally a fictional scene in an adventure novel about Masonry became, through plagiarism and adaptation, a scene about a Jewish conspiracy in Goedsche's novel, which was excised and altered to become the pamphlet "The Rabbi's Speech," the centerpiece of the *Protocols*.

But the transposition from Goedsche's text was not the *Protocols*' only manipulation: onto this supposedly authentic document was grafted excerpts from yet another nineteenth-century text, Maurice Joly's *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu*, an 1864 pamphlet debating the authority of the State as imagined by a conversation between Machiavelli as the proponent of despotism and Montesquieu as the spokesman of liberty. Widely interpreted as a critique of Napoleon III's authoritarian regime, Joly's *Dialogue* was banned under the Second Empire but had its own afterlife when the compiler of the *Protocols* excerpted only the Machiavellian passages, ascribing them to the fictional Jewish rabbi of Goedsche's novel. Moreover, Umberto Eco has shown that Joly had, for his part, lifted several sections from Eugène Sue's representation of the Jesuit plot, attributing the malevolent plan to Napoleon III instead of to the Society of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> And to this combination of the Jewish and Jesuit plots were added yet again certain elements from the Masonic plot: the *Protocols* feature adaptations from Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, as well as excerpts from the letter J.B. Simonini had sent to Barruel regarding the Jewish roots of the triple conspiracy. The *Protocols* represent thus a compiled textual conspiracy theory targeting the Jews that manages to borrow, adopt, or outright steal from all of the previous literary and historical representations of diabolical plots in nineteenth-century Europe.

The circulation of the *Protocols* occurred in fits and starts throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, reappearing in Europe, America, and the Middle East with regularity

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<sup>41</sup> See Eco's "Fictional Protocols," in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 136-137.

despite having been debunked as a forgery in the early 1920s. Adopted and reproduced by the Germans in Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda, the document's status as a forgery did not impede its real-life tragic effects, representing (in Umberto Eco's words) the perils of the "intrusion of fiction into life."<sup>42</sup> The long, strange history of the *Protocols* also demonstrates the extent to which narratives about conspiracies depend upon and draw from previous theories, borrowing and adapting existing myths in order to apply them to new targets, to explain new myths. It is in this sense that Frédéric Monier argues that conspiratorial discourses approach Gérard Genette's notion of the palimpsest, a "literature in the second degree" that is produced through the transformation of an anterior text: "cette tradition [de la littérature de la conjuration] permet une transmission de figures imaginaires, d'expressions, de symboles, de récits et de scènes littéraires, le tout dessinant à grands traits le visage du monde."<sup>43</sup> In particular, Monier demonstrates that the fear of the communist plot in 1920s and 1930s France frequently employed the same symbols and imagery found in nineteenth-century texts targeting Jesuits and Masons.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, anti-communist discourse joins up with the fears of the Jewish plot, often drawing on the image of the worldwide financial conspiracy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>45</sup>

But this technique of imitation is not simply limited to popular political or cultural discourses in the interwar period: the literary texts that I will study frequently demonstrate an

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<sup>42</sup> "Fictional Protocols," 139. And as David Aaronovitch has shown, the text has continued to reappear and be used in political discourse, especially in the Middle East. See his *Voodoo Histories*.

<sup>43</sup> Frédéric Monier, *Complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 182. On the notion of the palimpsest, see Genette's *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

<sup>44</sup> For example, in the 1928 anti-Bolshevik pamphlet *Espions rouges* by the Belgian diplomat Joseph Douillet, the communist conspiracy is represented as a map marked with red flags signalling potential conquests and described as resembling a spider's web, a metaphor that also figures in certain passages of Sue's *Le Juif errant*. See Monier's *Complot dans la République*, 172-177. Raoul Girardet comments that in nineteenth-century conspiracy theories, the spider represents "l'image symbolique privilégiée entre toutes." See his *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Monier analyzes in particular the 1927 pamphlet *Contre le communisme* by the journalist François Coty, which inscribes the *Protocols*' anti-Semitism in an anti-communist rhetoric. See *Complot dans la République*, 177-182.

awareness of a previous tradition of conspiratorial literature going back to Balzac. Particularly for those writers in the avant-garde, the conscious referencing to and appropriation of nineteenth-century forebears, from Saint-Simon to Baudelaire, becomes a way of creating an alternative subversive tradition akin to what Greil Marcus has dubbed the “secret history of the twentieth century” running through the avant-garde from Dada to punk.<sup>46</sup> A similar awareness and influence is at work with the novelists that I will study. For the most part, these authors do not write what might be considered genre fiction, the conventional adventure stories associated with the nineteenth-century serial novel. Yet at the same time, they integrate and adapt many of the conventions of their nineteenth-century literary precedents, particularly the adventure novel and the *bildungsroman*, using established forms of the conspiracy narrative in order to respond to the literary, political, and social demands of their own time. In this sense, the hand of conspiracies and secret societies of nineteenth-century literature can continue to be seen at work in the interwar era, extending its influence into a new golden age of conspiracies.

### **Approaches to Interwar Literature**

Existing studies on the literature of conspiracies and secret societies in the interwar period have, for the most part, been focused on two authors: Georges Bataille and Céline. The attention paid to these two cases is certainly merited, as they represent the two poles that orient this dissertation: the attraction to the secret society that Bataille exemplifies with the groups that he cofounded, Acéphale and the Collège de Sociologie; and the paranoid fear of a vast conspiracy that Céline illustrates in his anti-Semitic pamphlets. But the focus on Bataille and Céline has had the effect of obscuring the question of the representation of the conspiracy from a historical point of view: the Collège’s founding and Céline’s first anti-Semitic pamphlet both

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<sup>46</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

date to 1937, giving the impression that the theme of conspiracy did not manifest itself until the end of the decade. By providing a fuller picture, I demonstrate that both Bataille and Céline are part of a longer tradition extending well back into the 1920s, arguing that their work ought to be seen as more of a culmination of an existing trend than a radical innovation.

In the specific case of Bataille, since the publication of Denis Hollier's critical edition of texts relating to the Collège de Sociologie in 1979, critics have attempted to define the relationship between the esoteric secret society of Acéphale and the collective scientific endeavor of the College.<sup>47</sup> Notably, Marina Galletti's collection of texts written by Bataille in the mid-1930s has helped elucidate the political mission of this author.<sup>48</sup> Often these two groups are presented as breaks from an avant-garde literary and artistic tradition, either from the perspective of philosophy or science. For example, both Maurice Blanchot and Vincent Kaufmann's reflections on Acéphale primarily serve as a means for both thinkers to consider the philosophical idea of the impossible community of textual silence that the group represents.<sup>49</sup> In a parallel move, recent work by both Michèle Richman and Tiina Arppe has underlined the ways in which the Collège ought to be understood in the context of the French school of sociology.<sup>50</sup> I demonstrate in this dissertation that the model of the secret society for the avant-garde did not originate with either Acéphale or the Collège de Sociologie, but was present in the foundational

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<sup>47</sup> Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie, 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Georges Bataille, *L'apprenti sorcier: Du cercle communiste démocratique à Acéphale*, ed. Marina Galletti (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983); and Vincent Kaufmann, *Poétique des groupes littéraires (Avant-gardes 1920-1970)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997).

<sup>50</sup> Michèle Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Tiina Arppe's "Sorcerer's Apprentices and the 'Will to Figuration': The Ambiguous Heritage of the Collège de Sociologie," *Theory Culture Society* 26 (2009): 117-144.

texts of surrealism and continued to surface in debates over the avant-garde throughout the 1920s and 1930s, thereby allowing us to better understand the place of these groups in the avant-garde.

With Céline, critical attention to his representation of the Jewish plot has followed in the wake of Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, which reversed a longstanding critical tradition excising his anti-Semitic pamphlets from the rest of his work.<sup>51</sup> In Kristeva's reading of Céline as the incarnation of a revolutionary modernism, the paranoid ravings against the Jews found in the author's pamphlets represent an attempt at exploding modern culture's authoritative discourses. Kristeva's largely philosophical approach in turn inspired more historically-minded critics like Alice Kaplan and David Carroll to reconsider Céline's pamphlets within a larger context of French fascism and anti-Semitism; in particular, Kaplan's work on Céline's pilfering from other anti-Semitic pamphlets has demonstrated the extent to which he participated in a general climate that targeted the Jews as the cause of French decadence in the 1930s.<sup>52</sup> My focus on conspiracies helps bring that historical picture into sharper relief, showing that the representation of the Jewish plot not only ties Céline to a political tradition but also to a phenomenon of paranoid literature found in texts by fascist authors, as well as those of other ideological traditions.

Although the literary use of secret societies and conspiracies has yet to be the subject of an extended analysis, critical attention has been paid to the interwar period's general cultural interest in crime, especially in popular genres where the conspiracy often figures, such as the detective and spy novels. Recent works by Robin Walz and Dudley Andrew and Stephen Ungar

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<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

<sup>52</sup> See Kaplan's *Relevé des sources et citations dans Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Tusson: Editions du Lérot, 1987), as well as her *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and David Carroll's *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

have demonstrated that popular interest in violent crime, particularly in the often scandalous and lurid stories of the *fait divers*, was at a fevered pitch in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>53</sup> The detective novel in particular flourished during the interwar period; Georges Simenon published his first novels featuring the Commissaire Maigret beginning in the 1930s, his creation quickly becoming the iconic image of the Parisian detective uncovering the hidden stories behind brutal acts of crime.<sup>54</sup> Stories of espionage had a lesser but still notable success in France: Michael B. Miller has shown that the popular image of spies as heroes in World War I became a recurring trope in memoirs about the war, and the figure of the German spy in particular came to be seen as a source of much anxiety in the wake of Hitler's rise to power.<sup>55</sup> As the sociologist Luc Boltanski has recently stipulated, the popularity of these genres during times of cultural and political anxiety can be understood as an attempt at understanding crime and violence: the policeman or the spy represents the investigative desire to arrive at a logical explanation for social enigmas.<sup>56</sup> My choice of texts aims to address how similar concerns are manifested in what might be considered high literature as opposed to popular fiction. In this sense, Jonathan P. Eburne's recent analysis on the fascination with crime in the surrealist movement provides a critical model for my focus on secret societies. Eburne demonstrates that surrealism's interest in violent crimes was not simply a reflection of popular trends in interwar culture but was rather an integral part of articulating the surrealist aesthetic vision, providing a vocabulary for defining the relationship

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<sup>53</sup> See Dudley Andrew and Stephen Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), chapter 8; and Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> On the history of the detective novel, see Jean-Jacques Tournieu, *D'Arsène Lupin à San-Antonio: Le roman policier français de 1900 à 1970* (Paris: Mame, 1970).

<sup>55</sup> See Miller's *Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> Boltanski, *Enigmes et complots: Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

between the avant-garde and violence.<sup>57</sup> I argue that the secret society and conspiracy had a similar function in literature from the interwar period (and one not limited to surrealism), allowing authors to both intervene in political debates of their time and help define the practices of the avant-garde and the novel.

Outside of the specific questions of crime and conspiracies, critical considerations of interwar literature have attempted to account for the often extreme twists and turns in ideology and aesthetics that took place over the two decades. For example, Susan Suleiman's work on the *roman-à-thèse* outlines the formal specificity of the ideological novel, showing how the genre uses literary techniques in its goal of political orientation.<sup>58</sup> Régine Robin's work on the socialist realist novel provides both a theoretical and historical understanding of the rise of this communist literary genre.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the abundant critical corpus on the avant-garde – from Peter Burger and Renato Poggioli's respective theories of the avant-garde to Maurice Nadeau's history of surrealism – has helped define the practice of the surrealist movement.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Martin Puchner's work on the manifesto has influenced my consideration of the avant-garde's relationship between text and readership: Puchner shows how the genre functions on a textual level to define the group practice of the avant-garde, creating its communities through style and performance.<sup>61</sup> While these independent studies have informed my own focus on the representation of conspiracies in these different aesthetic trends, I also highlight the ways that

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<sup>57</sup> Jonathan P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> Susan R. Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as Literary Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Régine Robin, *Le Réalisme socialiste: Une esthétique impossible* (Paris: Payot, 1986).

<sup>59</sup> Régine Robin, *Le Réalisme socialiste: Une esthétique impossible* (Paris: Payot, 1986)

<sup>60</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964).

<sup>61</sup> Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).



both the avant-garde and the ideological novel developed in reaction to each other throughout the interwar period, using a similar vocabulary to define the practice of literature.

Scholars of interwar French literature have also endeavored to define the specificities of particular ideological traditions, particularly those of the extreme political movements of the period. Alice Kaplan and David Carroll's aforementioned work has attempted to define how writers like Céline and Drieu la Rochelle understood and articulated their fascist politics through literature. Similarly, studies of communist writers have underlined the sometimes contentious ways that these authors developed in relation to Communist Party doctrine.<sup>62</sup> Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's has analyzed from the position of political theory the various ways in which authors of different ideological tendencies – from the moderate Jules Romains to the fascist Drieu and communist Aragon –wrote about politics in their literary texts.<sup>63</sup> Although focused more on the content of political ideas than on literary form, Loubet del Bayle's work shows the extent to which interwar French literature was explicitly concerned with politics. One of the particularities of the interwar period is the way that authors on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum read each other and dialogued with each other, frequently addressing the same literary and political concerns. In this respect Denis Hollier's collection of essays *Les Dépossédés* provides an important reference point for my dissertation. Hollier's analysis of what he calls at one point the "anti-Proustian generation" demonstrates the extent to which various writers who came of age in the 1930s and 1940s formulated complex and often contradictory ways of engaging in the political and aesthetic debates of their era through literature.<sup>64</sup> Hollier's analysis

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<sup>62</sup> See Robin's *Le Réalisme socialiste* and the essays in *Ecrivains communistes français*, ed. Guillaume Bridet and Christian Petr (Paris: Harmattan, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *L'Illusion politique au XXe siècle* (Paris: Editions Economica, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> Denis Hollier, *Les Dépossédés: Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux, Sartre* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993).

traces the ambiguities of several important trends in the interwar period which will resurface in the pages of the dissertation, particularly regarding the frequently ambivalent manner in which authors reacted to the rise of fascism. Thus, following Hollier, the thesis seeks to define how a generation of writers used a similar vocabulary, rhetoric, and imagery to define the role of literature in the midst of a politically uncertain terrain. But against the somewhat disparate narrative that comes out of the independent essays of *Les Dépossédés*, I use the analysis of representations of secret societies and conspiracies to trace a narrative of interwar French literature as it struggles with the political and aesthetic upheaval of its time.

### **Outline**

The first chapter of this dissertation provides a critical overview of some of the important historical and theoretical references that have informed my study of interwar representations of secret societies and conspiracies. Cultural and political historians have demonstrated the extent to which the interwar era represented a time of uncertainty, extremity, and suspicion. In this chapter, I lay out some of the important conspiratorial narratives of interwar French culture and politics, a historical survey that will help situate my analysis of the literature of the era in subsequent chapters. I further situate the work of my thesis within the context of studies of conspiracies and secret societies, particularly from the social sciences, in order to demonstrate how my research can contribute to these fields of study by focusing on the question of the literary nature of conspiratorial discourses.

Following this historical and theoretical overview, the overall structure of the dissertation tends toward a chronological path through the interwar period, moving from the early 1920s up to the late 1930s. The second chapter focuses on the representation of secret societies based on marginal sexualities in the first section of Marcel Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1922) and in

André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925). Both authors were inspired by scandalous cases involving the accusation of secret conspiracies: for Proust, the 1907 Eulenburg Affair, a German political scandal in which one of the Kaiser's cabinet was accused of influencing foreign policy through a secret gay *camarilla*; and for Gide, two sensational cases – the trial of a Belgian counterfeiting ring and the suicide of a young youth in France – that were seen in rightist circles as the result of a secret, immoral influence. Both Proust and Gide reproduce to a certain extent the paranoid discourses of the time, but they also push against easy associations between sexuality and conspiracy by drawing attention to and ultimately questioning the ways in which such discourses are fashioned. Proust and Gide demonstrate important ways of interrogating the logic of the conspiracy, thus serving as points of reference for the authors studied in the following chapters, who either willingly claim the mantle of the secret society or project their own anxieties onto other groups.

The next two chapters show how the secret society presented itself as a seductive figure in both the avant-garde and the interwar novel. Chapter 3 focuses on the use of the secret society in articulating the project of surrealism from its foundations until the formation of the anti-fascist movement Contre-Attaque in 1935. Focusing on key moments in Breton's two *Manifestes du surréalisme* (1924 and 1929), I demonstrate that his use of the secret society model moves from one of initiation to one of exclusion, a shift that corresponds with the increasing controversy surrounding the goals of the avant-garde movement and which also entails a change in the textual strategies of the manifesto. The chapter then shows how the trope of the secret society was used in the polemics surrounding surrealism, a double-edged and ambivalent critique invoked to argue that surrealism was either too much of a secret society, a closed circle uninterested in true political action, or that it was not enough of one, unable to produce true

revolutionary change. Chapter 4 pursues the seduction of the secret society in two of the interwar period's most emblematic novelists, Jules Romains and André Malraux. In several volumes from the mid-1930s of Romains's monumental *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* and in Malraux's *La Condition humaine* (1933), the conspiratorial group is posed as a form of fraternity, a means of responding to the feeling of solitude brought on by the individualistic tendencies of liberal democracy. I read these novels within the context of political texts in the 1930s outlining techniques for assuming power, arguing that the value of the secret society for both Malraux and Romains ought to be located outside of the ideology of the conspiracies they portray and instead in the ways in which these groups provide concrete techniques for forging bonds between individual members. Their interest in conspiratorial techniques also informs their vision for the novel, outlining strategies for a textual fraternity.

The next two chapters focus on literary conspiracy theories on the left and the right in the latter half of the 1930s, when the tone becoming remarkably more paranoid and extreme. Chapter 5 analyzes the representation of capitalist and police conspiracies in socialist realist novels by Aragon and Paul Nizan, reading these novels in the context of the Communist Party's movement away from the conspiratorial platform of Bolshevism toward the mass movement of the Popular Front. I argue that the critique of the secret society can be read as a self-critique of the Bolshevik model, but that it also should be understood in the context of revolutionary writing of the interwar period. In developing theories of socialist realism, these communist writers stressed an aesthetic of openness and clarity, and the revelation of secret plots in these novels functions as a literal act of revelation and demystification. However, I also argue that the recourse to a conspiratorial representation ultimately complicates this vision of a transparent literature, erecting the author to a position of privilege and distinction with respect to his readers.

Chapter 6 also explores the use of the paranoid style in interwar literature by focusing on representations of a Jewish conspiracy in writings by two of French fascism's leading authors, Drieu la Rochelle and Céline. Both Drieu and Céline depict an image of a France caught in the throes of decadence, a national decline they explain through a systematic scapegoating of Jews. I demonstrate how this vision of decadence becomes ultimately a narrative of conspiracy, with both Drieu and Céline accusing Jews and Masons of attempting to destroy France from within. In Drieu's political writings from the era and in *Gilles*, his 1939 fascist *bildungsroman*, as in Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), the Jewish conspiracy functions as a way of explaining and historicizing the perceived decline of the French nation. In their texts, Drieu and Céline both traffic in conventional anti-Semitic tropes that extend back to the nineteenth century and beyond, and part of their project is to teach their readers how to recognize and reproduce the myth of the Jewish plot in order to construct a fascist future.

The final chapter, focusing on the groups Acéphale and the Collège de Sociologie, can be read as continuing chapter 2's analysis of the secret society in the context of the avant-garde. Acéphale, a secret society founded by Georges Bataille in 1937, endures as a powerful myth of the avant-garde since most of its members have continued to respect the vow to secrecy at its foundation. Against this esoteric and mystical vision of the secret society, the Collège de Sociologie – co-founded by Bataille with Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris – represents a return to the idea of the avant-garde as a conspiracy, with the group posing the theory of “sacred sociology” as a radical transformative force in society. By analyzing the competing and often contradictory ways in which the group members articulated their mission through their group manifesto, I argue that the Collège continues to exemplify the difficulties inherent to the avant-

garde's use of the secret society as a model for political practice, unable to reconcile conflicting conceptions of silence, activism, and mutual devotion.

By concluding my study just before the Fall of France in June 1940, I ultimately show how the themes of suspicion, paranoia, and scapegoating prevalent in Vichy-era France were already well in place before the war. The narratives of conspiracy and betrayal that emerged in literary and political discourse during both the Occupation and the Liberation did not emerge fully formed in June 1940; they had been part of the cultural terrain for the better part of a decade. The same observation could be made concerning the literary postwar scene, with the rise of the committed novel and the decline of the avant-garde already having been heralded even prior to the war through a shared discourse that posed literature in often political terms of openness, solidarity, and collective activism. In other words, the representation of conspiracies and secret societies by authors in the 1920s and 1930s allowed them to participate in and shape larger discourses of fear, paranoia, and anxiety that would have lasting effects on the practice and status of literature beyond the end the interwar years.

## Chapter 1

### Conspiracy Theories and Histories

In 1932, Jacques Lacan submitted his medical thesis, a reconsideration of the diagnosis and treatment of paranoia entitled *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*.<sup>1</sup> Lacan's theory of paranoia represented a break from previous psychological and psychoanalytical considerations of the illness, which had suggested that the symptoms of the paranoid patient – acts of aggression, feelings of grandeur, deliria of persecution – were the result of biological or physiological abnormalities. Against that mode of thinking, Lacan suggested that a patient's paranoid personality ought to be understood in interpersonal or social terms; paranoid delusions are less about biology than they are about the relational history of the patient with others. Lacan's case study for his thesis focused on "Aimée," a patient who, in a fit of paranoid delusion, attacked an actress she admired because Aimée believed that the object of her admiration had threatened her child. Lacan saw an act obeying a certain logic: Aimée assaulted the actress in an attempt at punishing herself, transferring her feelings of love and admiration into violence, an aggression that ultimately led to Aimée's arrest and internment. Lacan's theory of paranoia did not have much of an immediate impact on French psychiatry, but it was well-received by members of the surrealist group, whose techniques of automatic writing had informed Lacan's own theory of the unconscious logic manifested in acts of paranoia. In particular, as Jonathan Eburne demonstrates, surrealists like René Crevel and Salvador Dalí made use of Lacan's theory in order to assert the possibility of the productive nature of crime, the ways in which acts of violence can represent unconscious acts of creation.<sup>2</sup> Paranoia thus

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of Lacan's theory, and its appropriation by the surrealists, see Jonathan P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

became a way of thinking socially through the unsettling nature of crime, of coming to terms with the era's violence.

Lacan and the surrealists were not alone in their fascination with crime and paranoia; suspicion was on the minds of many in interwar French culture. The popular detective novel had begun its steady rise to prominence, portraying the figure of the stoic policeman in a constant struggle against corruption and violence. Popular magazines like *Détective* and *Police* recounted in lurid detail the sensationalistic criminal cases of the day, using the form of the *fait divers* to portray an image of Paris a city of dark shadows, with crime lurking behind every corner. Newspapers and magazines were plastered with violent crimes like the notorious case of the Papin Sisters, two maids who murdered their employer in 1933 (and who served as inspiration for both the surrealists and Lacan); or of Laetitia Toureaux, an Italian immigrant killed on the Paris Métro in 1937, whose case became politically explosive when it was revealed that a right-wing group had been behind it.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how conspiracies and secret societies played a role in the history, politics, and culture of a period marked by paranoia. Given the often explicitly political and historical nature of discourses surrounding conspiracies and secret societies, my goal is to provide a critical overview of key moments of the 1920s and 1930s that will serve as important references for the literary representations that will form the basis of subsequent chapters. One of the constants of conspiratorial discourses is that they arise during periods of fear and anxiety, as the figure of a secret plot organized by a diabolical enemy allows individuals and groups to craft narratives that explain events like war, crime, or economic depression whose

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<sup>3</sup> On *Détective* and *Police*, see Dudley Andrew and Stephen Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). On the Papin Sisters and surrealism, see Eburne's *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, chapter 6. On Laetitia Toureaux, see Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).



causes seem to surpass human understanding. Cultural historians have demonstrated that the interwar period exemplifies one of those times, as the economic and political instability in France confronted a world of uncertainty brought on by the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, and the rise of Nazi Germany, leading to the proliferation of conspiracy theories on both the left and the right targeting a whole host of targets, from communists and Freemasons to fascists and Jews.<sup>4</sup> But I also demonstrate that secret societies and conspiracies exerted a powerful hold over the cultural imaginary of the time not only because they appeared as a source of fear but also because they served as an object of seduction. At a time when the foundations of parliamentary democracy began to be seriously questioned by both the left and the right, secret societies emerged in some circles as a legitimate alternative to traditional parties and institutions of liberalism, an effective tool for efficient political action. This chapter will thus provide a critical overview of the political history of interwar years in France, using the lens of secret societies and conspiracies to demonstrate how the writers that I will study were able to participate in the political and cultural debates of their era.

The second section of this chapter addresses critical approaches to the study of conspiracies and secret societies, moving out from the specifics of the interwar period to see how sociologists, political scientists, and cultural historians have all defined these sorts of organizations. The attention paid to both conspiracies and secret societies by the social sciences has helped to determine the parameters for my own analysis of literary representations of these phenomena. In particular, these analyses stress the passage from political and social reality – the existence of actual conspiracies and secret societies in history – to discourses of fantasy and fear, what cultural historians traditionally distinguish as the difference between “conspiracy” and

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Frédéric Monier, *Complot dans la République*; Eugen Weber’s *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Olivier Dard, *La Synarchie, ou le Mythe du complot permanent* (Paris: Perrin, 1998); and Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro*.

“conspiracy theory.” This overview will thus help to define my own method and approach to the question of interwar literary representations of conspiracies and secret societies. For while studies of conspiracy theories tend to make use of literary texts as a means of understanding politics, culture, or history, they often neglect their function in and as literature.

### **The Interwar Years: An Era of Suspicion**

If one of the tenets of conspiratorial studies is that narratives of paranoia emerge at moments of precariousness and anxiety, the history of interwar France serves as an exemplary case study, as the economic and political fears of the day often translated into a search for conspiracies and secrets.<sup>5</sup> The monumental loss of human life in France wrought by the carnage of World War I reverberated across the next two decades, with the nation’s decimated and traumatized population becoming a symbol for politicians and intellectuals alike for the moral and political imperative to stave off another war. Close to 1.5 million Frenchmen had died in the war, with another million left permanently disabled, an unrecoverable loss that a historically low birth rate seemed only to exacerbate. Faced with growing populations in neighboring countries, the reality of France’s declining citizenry added to a sense of vulnerability, an impression of national decline. As the future fascist intellectual Pierre Drieu la Rochelle put it in *Mesure de la France*, the 1922 pamphlet that established him as one of the leading voices of his generation, this population disproportion was seen as “une carence, une rupture de la solidarité planétaire, une trahison,” a moral crime against France since it invited further invasion and war through the appearance of weakness.<sup>6</sup> The only population growth that occurred in France came from

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<sup>5</sup> General histories of the interwar era that have informed this historical overview include Weber’s *The Hollow Years*; Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic, 1914-1938*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy 1934-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front populaire* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Drieu la Rochelle, *Mesure de la France* (Paris: Grasset, 1964), 48.

immigration, as the government invited workers from Europe throughout the 1920s to compensate for the nation's decimated workforce. This influx of foreigners allowed France to weather the Great Depression better than most other European nations: in the midst of an economic upswing in 1929, the French government offered its fiduciary policies as an alternative to the reckless programs of the United States.

By 1932, however, the relative success of the French economy had stumbled, as decline settled in and proceeded to endure throughout the rest of the decade. As the immigrants who had come to work in France started to leave in the early and mid-1930s, a new population began to arrive, political refugees from Eastern and Central Europe. In the midst of an economic downswing, the presence of these refugees triggered a general xenophobic reaction, with French employment and culture seen by many as being taken over by foreigners who, their critics alleged, threatened to drag France into European conflicts in Germany, Austria, Italy, and Spain. Despite their proportionally lower population among these refugees, Jews in particular were targeted by this wave of xenophobia often tinged with paranoia, seen as secretly importing the mass cultures of America and Russia, or of inculcating a future Bolshevik revolution in France.<sup>7</sup>

The political crises of the interwar period only seemed to add to the sense of unease produced by a faltering economy. From 1924 to 1940, the French government saw a succession of 35 cabinets under 11 prime ministers, leading to the perception of what one historian deems "chronic instability."<sup>8</sup> In the face of political uncertainty and scandal, French intellectuals on both the right and the left began to question the legitimacy of the regime of parliamentary democracy, seeing it as a source of weakness, endless compromise, and vacuous speech. This

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<sup>7</sup> See Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 34-45.

<sup>8</sup> Weber, *The Hollow Years*, 111.

questioning of the liberalist heritage of the French Revolution had a philosophical dimension, a repudiation of the belief that the Republic could be governed and explained through logic and reason. For some, this disbelief in the premise of rationalism would lead to the fascination with fascism's promise of spiritual and emotional renewal, but it also took the shape of a more widespread interest in the occult or the mysterious, a hidden force working outside the obvious relationship of cause and effect.<sup>9</sup>

But the questioning of liberalism was not simply a matter of philosophy; it also took the shape of a reconsideration of social organization, with the goal of overcoming the isolating individualism of liberalism. New forms of communal and political life began to be explored that postulated theories of philosophical and moral anti-capitalism which would create a new sense of order and community. Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle famously termed these intellectuals the “political non-conformists of the 1930s,” the generation of political thinkers who sought a reconsideration of politics and the state through a move away from party politics.<sup>10</sup> Civilization had reached a point of crisis, these non-conformists argued, necessitating a spiritual revolution – separate from the communist or national-socialist version of revolution – that would lead to the ideal of a “new man.” The complete reappraisal of the forms of organization known under democratic society further entailed a search for new types of sociability and political action. In journals such as *Esprit* or *Ordre nouveau*, forms of political organization that in many ways recall the closed nature of secret societies were posited as pathways to this spiritual revolution; concepts like “ordre,” “corps franc,” “petit groupe,” “chevalerie” became important watchwords

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<sup>9</sup> See Zeev Sternhell's discussion of the mystical, anti-rationalist tendency in French fascism in *Ni droite, ni gauche: L'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30: Une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

because of the apparent efficiency and common sense of purpose they suggested in the reformation of the social order.<sup>11</sup> In other words, far from being a pure fantasy or mythological creation, the secret society presented itself to some in the interwar period as a viable form for revitalizing political and social life.

The case of X-Crise, one such group of these interwar political non-conformists, demonstrates the unpredictable and perilous path that the secret society model of politics can take. Founded by Jean Coutrot in 1931, X-Crise served as a small group of intellectuals and industrialists who organized through the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris and who attempted to think through the technical problems posed by industry and machinism. They advocated a technocratic policy of planned economics, wherein monetary policy would be governed not by the free market or by the state but by a small, central authority or agency.<sup>12</sup> While X-Crise's influence on economic policy remained limited until the Vichy regime, it was interpreted by left-wing critics as either an avatar of or cover for Synarchie, a supposed corporatist and technocratic secret agency run by America and England which was believed to have aims on assuming control over the French economy and government. Recalling in certain respects contemporary attacks on the American Federal Reserve as a cabal of internationalist agents, Synarchie served as a powerful left-wing myth in interwar France, its legacy even extending into accusations that Vichy had been the triumph of synarchic economic policies. The myth of Synarchie drew on other conspiratorial discourses of the interwar period, reproducing some of the similar rhetoric

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<sup>11</sup> Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30*. See in particular pages 298-301.

<sup>12</sup> On X-Crise, see Olivier Dard, "Voyage à l'intérieur d'X-Crise," *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire* 47 (July-September 1995), 132-146. Loubet del Bayle mentions that several members of X-Crise also collaborated with the group around the journal *Ordre nouveau*. See *Les Non-conformistes des années 30*, 108-112.

surrounding Jews and Masons as manipulators of economic policy in France.<sup>13</sup> Though a minor footnote in the political history of interwar France, the case of X-Crise would then seem to suggest that, even in the midst of a radical reassessment of political economy, the form of a closed political organization can still lend itself to fantasies of a subversive and conspiratorial force.

The distrust of liberal democracy that gave rise to groups like X-Crise also led to the spread of more established yet still anti-democratic political movements represented by the extreme left and the extreme right, both of which often sought to operate in extraparliamentary fashion that included a commitment to the political strategy of conspiracy. On the communist left, the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in the Soviet Union had led the Communist International to a hardline policy of class warfare that opposed compromise with either Socialist or moderate parties in an effort to export the revolution to other countries. The official “classe contre classe” doctrine of the 1920s and early 1930s stipulated that since communism is both antithetical to and excluded from bourgeois politics, it reserves the right to have recourse to clandestine formations and secret plots. In the wake of the establishment of this political platform, the “menace rouge” became a powerful mythology in interwar France by both right-wing and moderate politicians, with the fear of a communist putsch becoming the justification for putting into place measures for protecting national security.<sup>14</sup> On the extreme right, leagues

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<sup>13</sup> On the myth of Synarchie, see Dard’s *La Synarchie, ou le Mythe du complot permanent* (Paris: Perrin, 1998). In their cultural history of the murder of an Italian immigrant by the right-wing paramilitary group Cagoule, Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite briefly analyze the Synarchie myth, recounting how one of the figures in the murder case, the Russian economist Dimitri Navachine, was also one of the organizers of the X-Crise group, demonstrating the surprising ease with which the worlds of the conspiracy theories intersect in interwar France. See their *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France*, 84-85.

<sup>14</sup> Frédéric Monier shows that the usage of the word *putsch* became prevalent in French around 1926-1927, most often when describing a communist seizure of power. On the myth of the “menace rouge,” see his *Complot dans la République, 187-195*; and Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995).

like Pierre Taittinger's Jeunesses Patriotes and Georges Valois's Faisceau organized protests around a nationalistic and xenophobic platform that opposed the easing of Germany's war reparations. By the mid-1930s, the most powerful of these leagues, Colonel François de la Rocque's Croix de Feu, had become a veritable mass movement, one whose antiparliamentary rhetoric and paramilitary formation aroused the fear of a right-wing coup among Radical and Socialist politicians.<sup>15</sup>

The appeal of the political extremes in France was exacerbated by numerous political and economic scandals that surfaced over the course of the 1920s, of which the Stavisky Affair of 1933-1934 was the most infamous and influential. While focused on Serge Stavisky, the crooked financier at the center of the scandal, the Affair provided for many on the right the proof of the endemic corruption that the Third Republic had come to embody. The heart of the Affair was an economic scandal: Stavisky was discovered to have committed fraudulent bond transactions with the Crédit municipal de Bayonne of upwards of ten million francs. But this economic fraud became an outright scandal when it was revealed that Stavisky had ties to important deputies from the ruling Radical Party, who had facilitated his own links to the Crédit municipal and profited from his deals. With arrest imminent, Stavisky committed suicide, leading to widespread allegations that the government had ordered him killed in order to preserve its secrets.<sup>16</sup> As Kevin Passmore comments in his study of interwar leagues, to the extreme right-wing opponents of the reigning government, the Stavisky scandal represented three of the Third Republic's central problems: the lack of political morality, sustained financial corruption,

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<sup>15</sup> On the leagues, see Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave, 1924-1933* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); and the essays collected in *France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right*, ed. Brian Jenkins (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> See Weber's *The Hollow Years*, 133.

and the increasing prevalence of a secret, internationalist influence among the French left. As a Ukrainian-born Jew, Stavisky embodied a perceived “foreign menace” to the French nation, a symbol of the occulted, internationalist left made up of committees, Masons, and Jews.<sup>17</sup> This feeling of distrust and paranoia with the government culminated in violent protests held on February 6, 1934, organized by many of the right-wing leagues, including the Action Française, Jeunesses Patriotes, and Croix-de-Feu. As the protesting masses congregated on the Place de la Concorde, riots erupted, resulting in 15 deaths and over 1500 injured. February 6 was not the result of a right-wing conspiracy, nor does it even represent a serious attempt at a secret coup; the right-wing press had been openly calling for protests in the days leading up to the riots. Yet, as Frédéric Monier argues, the conflict quickly became a powerful “événement imaginaire”: the government of the Radical prime minister Edouard Daladier interpreted the riots as a plot organized by a right-wing coalition, led by Jean Chiappe, the rightist police prefect who had resigned in protest shortly before the riots.<sup>18</sup>

The displays of violence of February 6, 1934, effectively realigned political and intellectual life in France, on both sides of the aisles. The riots had, for the left, been a premonition of fascism, with the image of the frenzied masses creating a new imperative to rally together, reclaim the space of the street, and demonstrate the potential of the unified anti-fascist movement. The result was the creation of the Popular Front, an electoral alliance of the Radical Party, the Socialist French Section of the Worker’s International, and the French Communist Party. This alliance effectively shifted the political imperative on the left from one of class against class to anti-fascism vs. fascism, with the communists in particular abandoning their conspiratorial doctrine in favor of a platform of national assembly. The triumph of the Popular

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<sup>17</sup> See Passmore’s “The Construction of Crisis in Interwar France,” in *France in the Era of Fascism*, 186-192.

<sup>18</sup> Monier, *Complot dans la République*, 251-254.



Front in elections in 1936 led to the government of Léon Blum, France's first Socialist and first Jewish prime minister, which came to symbolize for the right the realization of their paranoid fears. General strikes in June 1936 that followed the Popular Front's accession to power were seen on the right-wing to be the product of a communist conspiracy, with Blum himself being accused of fomenting revolutionary projects. The Popular Front's philosophy of a politics of union and solidarity took the shape of policies aimed at the working masses: a forty-hour workweek, paid vacation, collective bargaining. Mass demonstrations became an integral part of the government's program, with the reclaimed street serving as a powerful symbol of the move away from a politics of secrecy and corruption; as Julian Jackson puts it, "the Popular Front was born in the street, and in the street it lived its most glorious moments."<sup>19</sup>

The politics of openness proposed by the Popular Front was articulated in part through the opposition to the figure of a closed financial society, the myth of the "deux cents familles." One of the most prevalent financial conspiracy theories of the era, and the subject of much debate during the economic crisis of the 1930s, these two hundred families refer to the two hundred largest shareholders of the Banque de France, whose vote had, since the Napoleonic era, determined the fifteen members of the Bank's Conseil de régence. But the term "deux cents familles" was coined in a speech by Edouard Daladier, who in 1934 inveighed: "Deux cents familles sont maîtresses de l'économie française et, en fait, de la politique française. Ce sont des forces qu'un Etat démocratique ne devrait pas tolérer... Elles interviennent dans l'opinion publique, car elles contrôlent la presse."<sup>20</sup> The phrase "200 families," with its insistence on the

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<sup>19</sup> Jackson, *Popular Front in France*, 307.

<sup>20</sup> On the myth of the 200 families, see René Sédillot, *Les Deux cents familles* (Paris: Perrin, 1988); and Pierre Birnbaum, *Le Peuple et les gros: Histoire d'un mythe* (Paris: Hachette, 1979). The Daladier quote appears on page 13 of *Les Deux cents familles*.

number and the shift to the personalized “families” at the expense of “shareholders,” helped craft an enduring paranoid image of the French economy controlled by a secret cabal of financiers. The Popular Front placed the 200 families at the heart of their economic program, arguing that the rights of workers were being trampled by a small coterie of financiers. In the Popular Front’s Matingon Accords legislation of 1936, the regency system of the Banque de France was reformed to put an end to the power of the 200 shareholders. The myth would go on to resonate beyond the limits of the legislative chamber. In his 1935 essay “Défense du roman français,” Aragon cited the myth as the counterpoint to the masses’ indivisible culture: the novel must become, Aragon argues, “une arme de la France véritable contre les deux cents familles qui y gèrent les banques, les tripots, et les bordels.”<sup>21</sup> André Breton and Georges Bataille placed the myth as the centerpiece of one of their group Contre-Attaque’s discussion sessions, with the announcement of the topic of the 200 families appearing alongside a reminder that the date – January 21, 1936 – was the anniversary of the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, superimposed on the image of a severed calf’s head.<sup>22</sup> As with other conspiracy theories, the myth of the 200 families inevitably tapped into the fears of an international capitalist conspiracy among the anti-Semitic extreme left and nationalist right, with the names of Jewish families like the Rothschilds and the Worms often reoccurring in propaganda targeting the 200 families, creating a source of fear that lived on long after the Popular Front’s legislative victory in 1936.

The Popular Front’s vision of a unified, anti-fascist front had important intellectual resonances as well. Seeing the ways that Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany had been able to mobilize their masses through cultural programs, the Popular Front encouraged intellectuals to confront the problem of what was termed “the organization of leisure,” or how the masses

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<sup>21</sup> Aragon, “Défense du roman français,” *Commune* 29 (January 1936), 568.

<sup>22</sup> The announcement is reproduced in Bataille’s *Oeuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 394.

occupied their time when not working. The cultural program of the Popular Front targeted democratic forms of culture designed to reach a broad audience, such as song, theater, and cinema.<sup>23</sup> In terms of literature, this tendency towards popularization resonated with the unified, anti-fascist platform of the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), a group that included Aragon, Malraux, and Gide among others, and which advocated after 1934 a shift from revolutionary culture to what Aragon termed an “indivisible” culture.<sup>24</sup> This ideal of solidarity with the masses entailed attempts at articulating the work of the intellectual, of defining the ties between the worker and the artist. Rather than a practice of art and writing that divided the masses from the intellectuals, the era’s new spirit of openness was meant to produce inclusive art, from socialist realist novels to popular song and cinema, moving away from practices and models resembling closed societies of intellectuals, separate from the masses. A survey distributed by Aragon after the 1935 Congrès mondial des écrivains pour la défense de la culture distilled the question for writers into the succinct “Pour qui écrivez-vous?”, with the answer intending to draw ideological and aesthetic lines in the sand: should the politically active, anti-fascist author write for a closed audience already initiated into the rules of literature, or should a more open form of literature be sought, one that can speak both to and for the masses?

The changing landscape of political and intellectual life on the left was not only limited to the writers associated with the Popular Front. In the immediate aftermath of February 1934, the street and the masses also became a primary concern for intellectuals on the extreme left who had resisted the doctrinaire policies of the Communist Party and remained part of the artistic avant-garde. Already by the end of the 1920s, André Breton’s Surrealist group had posed the

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<sup>23</sup> On the cultural politics of the Popular Front, see Pascal Ory’s *La Belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> See Jackson’s *Popular Front in France*, 118-120.

question of artistic exploration as one of revolution, a revolution that entailed subversive aesthetic practices – secret languages, occulted practices, initiatory rituals – destined to bring down bourgeois society from within. But the growing accusation that surrealism was nothing but a parlor game for the bored members of the bourgeois society it claimed to attack led to a gradual move away from the idea of the avant-garde. The Popular Front's emphasis on the solidarity of the intellectual with the masses deepened already-existing fissures within the surrealist movement around the question of the politicization of the avant-garde, a debate that famously led to the virulent conflicts between Breton and Georges Bataille at the end of the 1920s.

The strange turns of the next decade would, however, lead to a détente between the two precisely on the question of the masses and the street, when, in 1935, they formed the short-lived anti-fascist group Contre-Attaque. Presented as a rejection of what they deemed the excessively defensive approach of Popular Front, Contre-Attaque sought to use fascism's weapons to fight fascism, to harness the energies of the masses to challenge the right wing. Rather than parliamentary politics, Contre-Attaque advanced a platform of direct experience, one that would overtake the political space of the street. As Georges Bataille put it in his hortatory text "Front Populaire dans la rue":

si des hommes se sont trouvés dans les rues armés et soulevés en masse, portant avec eux le tumulte de la toute-puissance populaire, cela n'a jamais été la conséquence d'une combinaison politique étroite et spécieusement définie. Ce qui porte les foules dans la rue, c'est l'émotion soulevée directement par des événements frappants, dans une

atmosphère d'orage, c'est l'émotion contagieuse qui de maison en maison, de faubourg en faubourg, fait d'un hésitant, d'un seul coup, un homme hors de soi.<sup>25</sup>

The mass movement in the street cannot, for Bataille, be the result of a political organization; it must come from direct emotion, an experience that communicates itself like a contagion. But the difficulty of Contre-Attaque was that its extraparlimentary politics arose precisely at a time when such methods of organization were seen as illegitimate and illegal by the government. Rather than a sustained political avant-garde founded in mass politics, Breton and Bataille would eventually both be seduced by the ideal of the clandestine: Breton advocating for the power of the closed community in the midst of Contre-Attaque's activities, and Bataille turning to the explicit reclamation of secret societies with his groups Acéphale and the Collège de Sociologie.<sup>26</sup>

The impact of February 1934 and the arrival of the Popular Front in power was not limited to the left, as right-wing discourse and organization was also reshaped. The first result was a sharpening of the anti-communist and anti-Semitic rhetoric that had long characterized nationalistic discourse in France, with the tone often becoming paranoid and conspiratorial in the wake of the Popular Front's election. General strikes that had accompanied the Popular Front's accession to power in 1936 were decried on the right as the product of a communist conspiracy to cripple French industry. As France's first Jewish and socialist prime minister, Léon Blum seemed to embody the paranoid fears of the extreme right; in right-wing publications and on the floor of parliament he was accused of being a "subtle Talmudist" and a secret revolutionary, one who was the agent of a vast Jewish conspiracy to take over France.<sup>27</sup> Rightist newspapers like

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<sup>25</sup> Georges Bataille, "Front Populaire dans la rue," in *Oeuvres complètes I*, 403.

<sup>26</sup> On Contre-Attaque and the politics of social engagement in the 1930s, see Nikolaj Lübecker, *Myth and Recognition in Twentieth-Century French Literature and Thought* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Julian Jackson discusses both of these fears in his *Popular Front in France*: see 87-95 for the communist conspiracy theory, and 250-252 for the attacks on Blum.

*Gringoire* published lists of names of Jewish politicians in his cabinet, presented as the proof of an unspoken and unchecked Jewish influence on French politics. In the second half of the 1930s, the circulation of anti-Semitic pamphlets increased in France, partially supported by Nazi propaganda services but also encouraged by French newspapers like *La Libre Parole*, the newspaper founded at the end of the nineteenth century by Edouard Drumont, author of the monumental anti-Semitic *La France juive* (1896). The most famous of these pamphlets, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, purported to be the authentic secret outline for a Jewish conspiracy to take over banks, the press, and governments, eventually leading to world domination under a singular Jewish government. The *Protocols*' success begat French-specific anti-Semitic pamphlets that often mounted the accusation of a Jewish conspiracy targeting France. For example, *La Libre Parole*'s editor in the interwar period, Henry Coston, made a name for himself in anti-Semitic circles with the 1937 publication of *La Conspiration juive*, an article that claimed to uncover the Jewish-Masonic plot to install communism in France. Coston's text, like many of the anti-Semitic pamphlets, drew on a longer tradition of anti-Semitism that attacked Jews as traitors within France, agents of crony capitalism and revolutionary bolshevism, with the additional accusation that there is an entire plot afoot to install both regimes in France. Coston's text would go on to have its own literary afterlife when Céline plagiarized whole sections of it in two of his own anti-Semitic pamphlets, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937) and *L'Ecole des cadavres* (1938), where the Jewish conspiracy extends not only into politics and economics but into literature itself.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> On interwar anti-Semitic pamphlets and the fears of a Jewish plot, see Alice Y. Kaplan, *Relevé des sources et citations dans Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Tusson: Editions du Lérot, 1987); Michel Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), especially part II; and Pierre Birnbaum, *Un mythe politique: La 'République juive'* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), especially part II.

The fear that the riots of February 1934 would lead to a putsch organized by right-wing leagues made them the focus of the Popular Front's attack on fascism in France. Perceived as enemies to the new regime of openness and unity, the leagues were banned by the Popular Front once it came into power in 1936. While some, such as the Croix de Feu, reformed as official political parties, others moved to reorganize in more clandestine fashion, the most infamous example being the Comité secret d'action révolutionnaire (CSAR), popularly known as La Cagoule. Formed in 1935 by dissidents from the nationalist Action Française who deemed that league to be too timid in its post-1934 approach to politics, the Cagoule presented itself as a paramilitary force defending France from the threat of communism. The group adopted several of the hierarchical strategies of clandestine political movements, with agents operating mostly in the dark while its plans were orchestrated by the group's leader, Eugène Deloncle.<sup>29</sup> Calling itself a "franc-maçonnerie retournée au service de la nation," the Cagoule used its clandestine activities to strike fear in interwar France through arms dealings, sabotage, assassinations, and bombings.<sup>30</sup> The most spectacular attacks occurred on September 11, 1937, when the Cagoule blew up several buildings in Paris in order to foment the fear among the populace of a communist conspiracy. An unsuccessful coup attempt in 1937 led to the infiltration of the Cagoule by the police, with several hundred of its members being arrested, effectively leading to a period of dormancy. However, by that time the terrorist techniques of the group had already entered the national consciousness, giving rise to a sense of fear and anxiety that continued up until the war.

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<sup>29</sup> On La Cagoule, see Monier's *Complot dans la République*, especially 271-320; Brunelle and Croswhite's *Murder in the Metro*; and J.R. Tournoux's *L'Histoire secrète* (Paris: Plon, 1962).

<sup>30</sup> The Freemasonry quote comes from Deloncle, who was supposedly inspired by the Bavarian Illuminati in forming his secret organization. See Monier's *Complot dans la République*, 287.

### **Theories of Conspiracies**

Conspiracies and secret societies were, then, a very real presence in interwar France, particularly concerning the political evolution of the 1920s and 1930s. But they also exerted a powerful hold over the political and social imaginary, one that magnified and distorted their importance. This relationship between the reality of subversive acts and the fantasy of a vast plot has been the subject of considerable commentary from analyses of conspiracies and secret societies, particularly within the social sciences. Sociologists and anthropologists have long attempted to define the social value of secret societies, just as political historians have documented conspiratorial strategies in political movements. These critical considerations have demonstrated the extent to which these two subjects represent nominally independent ideas – a secret society is not by definition a conspiracy – that are consistently blurred once they move from practice to representation in popular discourse.

Sociological analyses of secret societies have argued that their defining characteristics – the imposition to silence, secret communications, shared sacred spaces, hierarchical divisions between members, codified rituals – do not in themselves presuppose a conspiratorial goal. Indeed, the disparate rites, rituals, and traits that define secret societies from Freemasonry and the Jesuits to college fraternities create different values and functions associated with the group: a secret society can symbolize initiation, or exclusion, or hierarchy depending on the perspective from which it is being considered. Despite this variety of valences attached to secret societies, sociologists have argued that such groups underline the mystery of power, leading to an interpretative slippage toward the idea of conspiracy.

For example, in lectures given at the Institut d'ethnologie at the end of the 1920s, Marcel Mauss classified secret societies as one of the “secondary forms” of social and political



organization, marked by a relative notion of secrecy: while the activities and members of such a group are secret, it has certain juridical or religious purposes that are well-known by the public.<sup>31</sup> Because secret societies are traditionally separate from the official institutions of power, they are often equated with conspiratorial societies (what Mauss terms “sociétés de complot”), but Mauss stresses that this easy equivalency is an error, one that too often attempts to understand other cultures through the lens of the ethnographer’s own. Instead, he assigns the ethnographer the task of understanding the particular function of the secret aspect of secret societies within its context, to examine how, why, and under what conditions the group holds its secret.<sup>32</sup>

The German sociologist Georg Simmel had made a similar argument at the start of the twentieth century, arguing that this relativity of secrecy is precisely what heightens the interest in secret societies. For Simmel, the true value of such groups can be located in the sense of social intensification that they provide: individual members become part of a smaller whole that reproduces and heightens the bonds between them, much like the larger society that surrounds them. But the myths that develop around secret societies are, in Simmel’s analysis, directly related to his argument that secrecy always implies a regulation of information. Operating through the principle of exclusion, secret societies effectively keep the uninitiated at bay through a manipulation of information; while the existence of the group may be known, the vow to secrecy and silence concerning its rituals, beliefs, or ideals controls the free flow of information and communication in the society at large. The imbalance of information that the secret entails leads to a tendency to, in Simmel’s words, “intensify the unknown through imagination, and to

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<sup>31</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Manuel d’ethnographie* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1967), 129-131. The *Manuel* is a recomposition of Mauss’s lectures, published by one of his students.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 7 will show how Mauss’s distinction becomes an important reference for the members of the Collège de Sociologie.

pay attention to it with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality.”<sup>33</sup> Because such organizations seem to appear as miniature but intensified societies, they are perceived as threats or competition to the official authority. From the outside, then, the secret society represents something that invites imaginings about power, a group onto which anxieties of authority are constantly projected.

What Mauss and Simmel both underline in their analyses is how the reality of the existence of a secret society almost inevitably exerts a powerful hold over the social imaginary, becoming a mythological conspiracy. The same movement from reality to myth obviously extends to conspiracies themselves: secret plots and seizures of power represent a real strategy for assuming power in a society, one that has been employed at numerous moments in the history of civilization. French here provides a helpful distinction between the notions of *complot* and *conspiration*: as Frédéric Monier has argued in his legal and political history of conspiracies in the Third Republic, the term *complot* – normally referring to the project and maneuvers involved in an attack against the state – developed as a legal notion, a crime against the state as embodied in the acts of conspirators, as distinct from *conspiration*, the idea or agreement to wrest power from the government. In other words, the idea represented by a *conspiration* only becomes a *complot* at the moment it is deemed illegitimate by the authorities, when it becomes a threat to the power of the state. To this distinction between the conspiracy as a plan and as a crime is added a third: the collective fantasy of a malevolent, tight-knit group whose goal is nothing short of world domination. Monier uses the French *conjuración* to refer to this mythological creation;

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<sup>33</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Secret and the Secret Society,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1950), 333.

it is a phenomenon that cultural historians often term “conspiracy theory” to distinguish the idea from the acts of a conspiracy.<sup>34</sup>

This distinction between the reality of conspiracies and the discourse that surrounds them forms the basis of one of the pioneering texts of the study of conspiracy theories: Richard Hofstadter’s 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”<sup>35</sup> Written as response to the right-wing conspiratorial rhetoric of McCarthy-era America, Hofstadter demonstrates how a discourse built on the fear of secret societies – most notably of Illuminati, Freemasons, and Jesuits – animated populist movements throughout the nineteenth century and helped define the American republic for minority political movements as a target of conspiracies. Hofstadter’s famous term of “paranoid style” refers to a Manichean view of history as a struggle between heroic figures and malevolent agents, with conspiracies seen as not existing within history but as what he calls “the motive force in history”: “History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade.”<sup>36</sup> Such a vision of history presents the denunciator of the conspiracy as a hero, one who is able to put all the hidden clues together, reconstruct history, and resist the forces of evil working to overthrow society. The paranoid style, as Hofstadter emphasizes, represents a personalized version of history, one in which historical tumult is the result of individual agents who must be discovered and conquered by the hero. Despite this attention to the personalized elements of conspiratorial discourse, Hofstadter’s

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<sup>34</sup> See Monier’s *Complot dans la République* for the semantic evolution of the terms *complot*, *conspiration*, and *conjurat* through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially pages 12-18.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 29. Emphasis in original.

focus is not so much on the individual proponents of a paranoid version of history, but rather on the ways in which entire political movements are built around such attitudes.<sup>37</sup>

Most critical commentary on Hofstadter's essay has zeroed precisely in on the way he describes what might be considered a collective psychiatry, using a term – “paranoid” – that psychologists and psychoanalysts apply on an individual basis. The feeling of persecution and punishment normally inflicted on the individual psyche becomes transferred to the collective, with the republic, or culture, or entire way of life, seen as the target of a conspiracy. Hofstadter himself pushed back against an excessively psychological or psychoanalytic interpretation of use of the concept, arguing that he was employing it to describe a world view: “I use the term much as historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style. It is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself.”<sup>38</sup> But as critics have asserted, by suggesting that entire mass movements can be deemed as “paranoid,” Hofstadter essentially classes entire political stances as pathological, a not unproblematic approach, given his frequent association of paranoia with populist movements.<sup>39</sup>

Hofstadter's analysis of the paranoid style demonstrates the extent to which conspiracy theories function as political discourses, with the events and phenomena that conspiracy theories tend to target – war, revolution, economic depression, elections – all bearing some relation to the political sphere. As Raoul Girardet argues, the myth of the conspiracy functions in an implicitly ideological manner by creating a seemingly rational framework for incomprehensible events, one

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<sup>37</sup> In his analysis of Hofstadter's essay, Luc Boltanski argues that the critical success of the text can be traced to its exportability: the “paranoid style” is not particular to American politics, but can be applied to any political or historical situation. See his *Enigmes et complots: Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 268-270.

<sup>38</sup> Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 4.

<sup>39</sup> Hofstadter's interest in such social psychiatry was inspired by his reading of Adorno's theory of the “authoritarian personality.” See Boltanski's *Enigmes et complots*, 268; and David S. Brown's *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 146-152.

that serves to both explicate and organize the political and social terrain. In reaction to complex events – war, crime, economic instability – the gesture of accusing a criminal society defined by its complete devotion to a malevolent goal provides a coherent and seemingly logical political explanation for those phenomena. To take the classic example from 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, the bewildering Revolution cannot be the product of abstract historical or economic forces; it must be the concrete and secret work of a conspiracy organized by the Freemasons. But the move towards a paranoid discourse is not just about offering a politically motivated account that differs from the official version of history; its ideological impact also creates order in an uncertain political landscape and mobilizes allies against the secret enemy. Thus the specter of a Masonic conspiracy surfaces at those moments in France – after the Revolution, during the Dreyfus Affair – when the conflict between Church and State seems particularly fraught, with the fight against the Masonic plot entailing a nationalist opposition to the liberal or rational ideology that right-wing opponents ascribe to this secret society.<sup>40</sup>

In articulating a narrative about the hidden sources of social anxiety and political tumult, conspiracy theories are inherently about ordering history, creating a logic of cause-and-effect. For this reason, their study has had value to critics interested in defining the mission of the social sciences. Most notably, Karl Popper has offered a stringent critique of historical approaches that resemble conspiracy theories, going so far as to argue that historicism “may even be said to be a derivative of the conspiracy theory.”<sup>41</sup> In Popper’s analysis, conspiracy theories of society are essentially modern updates on Greek mythology: just as Homer’s theistic vision asserted that all human events were the result of conspiratorial interventions by the gods, conspiracy theories represent what he calls a “somewhat primitive kind of superstition” that substitutes capitalists,

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<sup>40</sup> Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 459.

Jews, or communists for the Homeric deities.<sup>42</sup> Popper's target is not just those political movements who make use of conspiracy theories once they arrive in power – Hitler's conspiratorial thinking serves as his primary example – but also those social scientists who propose visions of society that approach a conspiratorial mode of thinking, one that negates the possibility of unintended and unexplainable consequences. In Popper's view, such a method of inquiry makes the mistake of thinking of collectives and groups as individuals with conspiratorial goals, which conflicts with the social sciences' true analytic purpose, to uncover the ways in which those systems operate regardless of their intentions. In this sense, "the conspiracy theory of society" is, for Popper, fundamentally an epistemological question for the social sciences: social theorists ought to recognize groups and collectives as having both unintended and intended consequences.

The sociologist Luc Boltanski has recently offered a similar analysis of the conspiracy theory's relation to the social sciences, particularly concerning the paranoid discourse's emergence at times of instability, anxiety, or extremism. In Boltanski's analysis, the preponderance of conspiracy theories in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be interpreted as an attempt at coming to terms with social enigmas. Their rise can be tied to the creation of the modern nation-state, which attempts to provide a singular narrative of order and authority that inevitably conflicts with phenomena of disorder, from crime and violence to war. Conspiratorial discourses are, then, narratives of transgression, tending to emerge precisely at those moments when the state's version of events seems to misfire, when crises or anxieties challenge its singular interpretation of history. For Boltanski, the roughly contemporaneous historical advent of conspiracy theories (present in popular genres such as the detective and spy novels) and the discipline of sociology was not a matter of pure coincidence. Rather, he sees

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

them as two sides of the same coin, with both the paranoid discourse and the sociological discourse representing attempts at understanding reality by focusing on moments of social discord or mystery and having an investigative impulse as their basis.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Conspiratorial Style in Literature**

These political and sociological considerations of secret societies and conspiracies underline the ways in which these sorts of groups are almost always perceived as equivalent notions, with narratives about secret societies often becoming conspiratorial discourses. These kinds of groups are marked by a number of ambivalences, with the alluring aspects of secret societies and conspiracies becoming sources of fear through their paranoid representation in popular discourse. Thus the mutual solidarity exemplified by the bonds of a secret society becomes the sign of exclusion, or of a hidden intent, just as the political efficiency of a conspiracy operating outside of the bounds of normal politics becomes the very mark of its vast, criminal power. Above all, these critical analyses highlight the ways in which these narratives are about history and politics, with discourses against secret societies and conspiracies often having the function of creating an ideologically-oriented vision of historical events.

This emphasis on narrative is exemplified by the way in which social scientists studying the myths of conspiracies and secret societies continually make use of fictional texts (as opposed to tracts, pamphlets, or essays) as the primary source material for their studies of a cultural or political phenomenon. In this respect Raoul Girardet's *Mythes et mythologies politiques* is an exemplary case: in his study of the political myth of the conspiracy, all of his analyses come from literature: the Masonic myth in Alexandre Dumas's historical novel *Joseph Balsamo*, the Jesuit myth in Eugène Sue's *Le Juif errant*, and the myth of the Jewish plot in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a work compiled from fictional texts. In *Enigmes et complots*, Luc Boltanski

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<sup>43</sup> See Boltanski's *Enigmes et complots*, in particular chapter 1.

makes a similar case for the twentieth century: the conspiracies, secrets, and lies in the English and French detective and spy novels form the centerpiece of what Boltanski sees as a phenomenon of investigation into the reasons behind the social enigmas of crime and violence. This phenomenon is particularly true for considerations of popular contemporary literature and media: in *La Société parano*, Véronique Campion-Vincent places Dan Brown's 2003 bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* and the television series *The X-Files* at the heart of her exploration of the conspiracy theory in modern society.<sup>44</sup> Campion-Vincent, Boltanski, and Girardet are not alone: the analysis of conspiracy theories in the social sciences almost systematically passes through studies of texts that would more often be considered the domain of the humanities, be they novels, films, or TV programs.<sup>45</sup> And lest it be thought that this is a purely modern phenomenon, Roger Caillois often placed Balzac and Baudelaire at the center of his own sociological explorations of the conspiracy in the 1930s.<sup>46</sup>

This focus on fictional texts is to a certain degree understandable. As noted in the Introduction, the modern conspiracy theory emerges in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the moment when the serial novel begins its own rise, with narratives of conspiracy and secrecy forming an essential part of the suspense and twists of the genre.<sup>47</sup> Further, the articulation of a conspiracy theory postulates an imagined reality, or an alternative version of events, with the act of explaining history through its secret causes resembling a well-ordered novel or film. In other words, the

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<sup>44</sup> Véronique Campion-Vincent, *La Société parano: Théories du complot, menaces, incertitudes* (Paris: Payot, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the role of Sue's *Le Juif errant* in Geoffrey Cubitt's *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and Michel Leroy's *Le Mythe jésuite: De Beranger à Michelet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992); as well as the place of popular television series like *The X-Files* in Pierre-André Taguieff's *La Foire aux Illuminés: Esotérisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> This will be addressed in chapter 7.

<sup>47</sup> On this historical coinciding, see Girardet's *Mythes et mythologies politiques*.



problem of conspiracy theories is primarily one of representation, of how reality makes the passage into fantasy or mythology. But for sociological or political analyses of representations of conspiracies and secret societies, the use of literature (or cinema, or television) is, in these studies, always to serve the purposes of the social sciences, to see how the representation of the secret society functions politically, sociologically, or anthropologically. The actual literary means of representation – questions of style, genre, form, or register – is often neglected in favor of content, and the role of the conspiracy in shaping literature ignored in the pursuit of other disciplinary concerns.

While these political and historical considerations have influenced this dissertation, providing an important context for my study of the representations of conspiracies and secret societies, I approach the literature of the interwar period with a different question in mind, namely how these representations function within and for literature, how they influence and affect literary questions of form, style, and genre. One of the contentions of this thesis is that the secret plot is as much a literary *topos* as it is a cultural phenomenon, one that was well established by the end of the nineteenth century, and I seek to understand how this *topos* played a role in the development of interwar French literature. This is not to say that the literary dimension of secret societies and conspiracies has been completely ignored by critics. However, most existing studies have focused on postwar American literature by authors such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Joan Didion, showing how paranoia functions in postmodern literature as a means of putting into question the reliability and authority of narrative.<sup>48</sup> One of

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<sup>48</sup> See Samuel Coale's *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005); and Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). One exception to this tendency is Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), which shows how conspiracies played a role in the development of nineteenth-century American fiction.

my goals in this thesis is to see how the representation with conspiracies and secret societies can function in literature in texts that do not yet belong to the era of suspicion that Nathalie Sarraute defined in the postwar era, the distrust between reader and author that occasioned the reconsideration of literary form in the novel.<sup>49</sup>

To this end, my work can be seen as taking up Richard Hofstadter's proposal of the conspiracy theory as primarily a question of style. While critics have long dwelt on Hofstadter's use of the word "paranoid," they have by and large neglected how he uses a literary or artistic term to describe a political phenomenon. As we saw above, Hofstadter did not intend any overtly psychological or psychoanalytic meaning in employing the notion "paranoid style"; rather, he uses the concept to discuss a political worldview, a way of expressing oneself. He thus focuses on recurring tropes of the political paranoid, from the image of a diabolical enemy to the use of apocalyptic imagery, while also demonstrating that it makes recourse to certain common rhetorical flourishes, like exaggeration, extravagant use of "proofs" and documentation, and an insistence on rationalism.<sup>50</sup> In tracing the paranoid style, then, Hofstadter proposes a way of understanding a political viewpoint as it is represented: the worldview he describes in the essay is one that can be defined primarily through its stylistic tics, independent of the ideology of the subject who expresses it. I follow Hofstadter in that my use of the term "paranoia" is not intended as a pathology of the individual authors; rather I use it as a way of describing a discourse that has its own history, structure, and form related to the conspiratorial worldview.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Ere du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

<sup>50</sup> See section 5 of "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 29-40.

<sup>51</sup> Lacan himself had proposed a relationship between his theory of paranoia and style in 1933 article in *Le Minotaure* entitled "Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l'expérience," in which he argued, like Hofstadter, that style and paranoia obey similar rules of logic.

In other words, my focus on the literary representation can be distinguished from cultural histories or political theories that use the literary text to define political or cultural trends, seeing novels about conspiracies as mere indications of cultural, political, or psychological anxieties. It thus seeks to shift the focus from collective representations to the ways in which individual authors made use of existing myths or discourses about secret societies and conspiracies as a means of articulating their own vision of both literature and politics. The representation of the secret society is not, then, just a framework for intervening in social or political debates of the interwar period; it is also a useful tool for discussing the role and practice of literature. In order to bridge these two independent functions – social commentary and literary practice – the question of style comes to the fore: the representation of the conspiracy and the secret society entails certain stylistic choices that affect both the political positioning of the author and the literary form of his work. While Hofstadter focuses only on the question of paranoid style as it manifests itself in conspiracy theories, this dissertation proposes that the same is true of representations of the secret society that focus on the seductive elements of such an organization. Representing the secret society primarily in terms of initiation, or of fraternity, implies different textual strategies than suggesting that it is a community defined by exclusion or by power. As opposed to the taxonomy of traits of the paranoid style of political discourse that Hofstadter proposes, I will trace how the representation of the secret society and conspiracy exerted a profound influence on the shape of literature in the interwar period, often manifesting itself in unpredictable, conflicting, or ambivalent ways. As we shall see, it is in many ways the most appropriate response of literature to an era of uncertainty and difficulty.

## Chapter 2

### *Franc-maçons ou faux-monnayeurs:* Sexual Secret Societies in Proust and Gide

The coupling of Marcel Proust and André Gide is something of a tradition in literary criticism. Two monuments of early twentieth-century French letters, forever bound together anecdotally by Gide's rejection of the manuscript for *Du côté de chez Swann* while at the helm of the *NRF* and more significantly by their individual attempts at testing the boundaries of the novel's form. Their stances as gay writers touching openly on homosexual themes has, in particular since the advent of queer theory, made them critical lodestones for histories and theories of sexuality, often on opposing poles.<sup>1</sup> In an entry in his *Journals* in 1921, Gide famously describes bringing Proust a copy of *Corydon*, the book in which Gide openly defends same-sex relationships, and having Proust declare: "Vous pouvez tout raconter...mais à condition de ne jamais dire: *Je*." The story has had a certain historical weight, particularly concerning the roles to which the two authors are often assigned: Gide as the confessional author brazenly defending his sexual preferences, daring to say *I*, against Proust as the often harsh portrayer of homosexual behavior, refusing to represent his own experiences under the rubric of transparency or autobiography.

Proust's remark to Gide is intended to suggest the possibility of a certain freedom that comes from the use of the third person, the ability to tell all as long as it is not presented as autobiographical, but it also implies a certain ominousness: if you do say *I*, you cannot – you should not – say everything about homosexuality. This threat was not simply a matter of fantasy for Proust: the specter of Oscar Wilde's 1895 trial for sodomy continued to loom large over the

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<sup>1</sup> Of the numerous texts that focus on comparisons of Proust and Gide in their treatment of homosexuality, this chapter has been informed by Leo Bersani's *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Lawrence R. Schehr, *French Gay Modernism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); and Michael Lucey's *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

cultural imaginary of the time, and Gide himself had been the subject of attacks from right-wing authors accusing him of being a decadent and immoral influence in French society. (Gide himself seemed well aware of this threat: *Corydon* had been originally published in several anonymous, private editions.) In other words, when it comes to writing about homosexuality, the threat of scandal, or of persecution, imposes an imperative to secrecy: what Proust and Gide both know of, what they both speak of with each other, cannot be shared through the first person.

This chapter addresses the ways in which both Proust and Gide explicitly tie together secrecy and homosexuality by using figures of secret societies to represent sexual communities. In two of their more important and canonical texts – Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1922) and Gide’s *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925)<sup>2</sup> – these authors boldly and overtly addressed group practices of same-sex relations that were normally and necessarily inscribed under the sign of secrecy.<sup>3</sup> In their frank treatment of homosexual relationships, these texts stress forms of organization and initiation that determine and define sexual societies, practices that are normally only known to members of these societies yet which often invite conspiratorial interpretations from the outside. Part of the interest that both Proust and Gide’s texts present in the context of this dissertation is that they were either directly or indirectly inspired by scandalous events that had conspiratorial overtones. Proust followed closely the Eulenburg Affair of 1907-1909, the trial on homosexuality in Germany in which Kaiser Wilhelm’s government was accused of being under the influence of a gay “*camarilla*” led by Philipp zu Eulenburg, one that supposedly controlled German foreign policy from behind the scenes in the aims of a more dovish,

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<sup>2</sup> Marcel Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), abbreviated here as *SG*; and André Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, in *Romans et récits*, vol. II, ed. Alain Goulet (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), abbreviated here as *FM* and *JFM*, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Schehr has argued the mid-1920s saw the literary map significantly altered by these two texts and their frank representations of male homosexuality. See his *French Gay Modernism*, 6-7.

Francophilic government. The focus on inversion that begins in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and continues throughout the remaining volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* is due in some part, critics have suggested, because of Proust's interest in the Eulenburg Affair, the event serving as a catalyst that transformed Proust's novel.<sup>4</sup> My analysis of Proust centers on what might be considered the novel's most pivotal moment, the first section of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, a scene in which Proust's narrator observes a cruising encounter between the Baron de Charlus and the tailor Jupien. This episode is followed by the expositional section frequently referred to as "La Race des tantes," an often scathing commentary on inverts, or men whose physical bodies hide souls of women.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the scene, the narrator describes inverts through a series of analogies and metaphors, using images taken from nature, politics, and society to give the portrayal of a sexual community that is ever-present and yet always hidden. In the course of describing this group's behavior, the narrator makes a reference that never fails to attract a mention by critics of the scene: a comparison between the society of inverts and Freemasonry, thus explicitly tying the sexual secret society to one of the most powerful conspiratorial myths of the modern age.

For its part, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, the only one of his books that Gide deemed to be a "real novel," had as its initial inspiration two lesser-known stories from the first decade of the twentieth century, also involving clandestine organizations: a 1906 trial of a Luxembourg counterfeiting ring and the 1909 suicide of a French teenager whose death had been attributed to

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<sup>4</sup> On the impact of the Eulenburg affair in the writing of the *Recherche*, see Maurice Bardèche, *Marcel Proust romancier*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1971), 160-162; and Antoine Compagnon's "Notice" to *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 1196-1202. On the history of the Eulenburg affair and its relationship to discussions of homosexuality, see James Steakly, "Iconography of a Scandal: Political Cartoons and the Eulenburg Affair in Wilhelmin Germany," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 233-263.

<sup>5</sup> Proust preferred this term to "homosexual," which he deemed too Germanic in its overtones. In referring to Proust's novel I will follow his terminology, but I also use more contemporary terms for referring to same-sex practices elsewhere in the chapter.

the malevolent influence of a group of his classmates. Writing in his *Journal* in 1919, Gide makes reference to both the counterfeiters and the suicide ring and gives himself the following challenge: “Fondre cela dans une seule et même intrigue” (*JFM*, 525). In combining these two narratives of secret groups into one plot, Gide added a third, a magic society that serves as one character’s introduction to masturbation. These three secret groups provide the framework for a series of interlocking and notoriously complicated storylines: Bernard, a bastard son of the bourgeoisie leaves his family to take up with his friend Olivier, who develops an attraction for his novelist uncle Edouard; amoral and decadent writers work in cahoots with counterfeiting thugs; and a young, anxious child, Boris, falls in with a malicious group of youths, ultimately committing suicide in a highly suspect game of Russian roulette. But these narratives of secrecy and criminality, what would normally provide the true substance of a detective novel, are often read as the mere background for the “primary subject” of Gide’s novel, namely how representation works within the novel. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is a novel about the writing of a novel, most obviously and memorably exemplified by its depiction of a novelist writing a novel also called *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, and like Gide, maintaining a record of his progress in a *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*.

Within these stories, Proust and Gide represent sexual practices by stressing certain elements common to secret societies: Charlus and Jupien recognize each other through signs and signals that would normally pass as imperceptible, and young Boris is initiated into the practices of masturbation by one of his friends. Yet Proust and Gide’s use of this topos to describe sexual practices was not original to their texts. Particularly in the case of Proust, he demonstrates an intimate awareness of nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses that stoked the fear of a gay presence, associating homosexuals with more established conspiratorial myths like the fears of

the Masonic or the Jewish Plot. As we saw in the Introduction, myths of conspiracy frequently appropriate and build upon previously existing myths: the fear of the Jewish plot in the late nineteenth century often developed by drawing upon the same images and tropes found in the specter of the Masonic plot. The discourse on secret societies and conspiracies thus seems to suggest a certain constancy: while the object might change, from Masons to Jews to inverts, the structure and logic remain the same. One way in which Proust and Gide differ from popular representations of marginal sexualities, and which will distinguish them from authors I will study in later chapters, is that they never make any explicit attempt to tie these groups to historical events. In other words, inverts or counterfeiters in these novels are never accused of causing a cataclysmic event, or of being the real motive force behind history. Instead, both Proust and Gide stress the processes of initiation and recognition that undergird secret societies, suggesting the ways in which sexual communities are formed.

This insistence on the principles of initiation and recognition does not mean that conspiratorial discourses are completely absent from Proust and Gide's novels, as both demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the structures and forms of conspiratorial discourse. In the case of Proust, the often paranoid rhetoric against inverts laid out in "La Race des tantes" reproduces much of the popular discourses of his era that accused homosexuals of being a state within a state, an international rootless society that, like Jews and Masons, owes no loyalty to the nation. At the same time, the narrator's reflection on his own understanding of Charlus as an invert lays bare the very means by which a paranoid discourse is produced, demonstrating how conspiratorial narratives depend upon a logic that sets interpretation prior to observation. For his part, Gide offers a similar critique of an important element of paranoid discourses, but one that takes as its target the logic of consequence that narratives of conspiracy offer, the belief that a



secret society can be assigned a clear agency in the unfolding of historical events. The tragic story that serves as the centerpiece of his novel – the suicide of a young boy involved in a secret society – would at first seem to suggest a direct line of causality, one where the group of youths is clearly behind the death, but the novel pushes back against such a reading, suggesting instead that the relationship of cause-and-effect is a far murkier matter. This questioning of the logic of secret society narratives has, I argue, a relationship to the sexual secret society of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, providing a subtle rejoinder to moralizing discourses that target marginal sexualities.

**“Formant une franc-maçonnerie...”**

The first chapter of *Sodom and Gomorrhe* remains one of the most famous and commented-upon sections of the entire *Recherche*. Because of its relatively self-contained nature and brevity, its frank treatment of inversion, and its deployment of a wealth of Proustian metaphors, the section has provided ample fodder for those critics attempting to analyze Proust’s complicated representation of same-sex relations. Through the depiction of a cruising scene between the Baron de Charlus and the tailor Jupien, Proust famously portrays the ways in which two inverts – Proust’s preference in same-sex terminology, indicating men whose bodies hide souls of women – recognize this quality in each other and negotiate a sexual encounter, all under the watchful eye of the narrator. The metaphors that the narrator sets forth in describing both the general nature of the invert and the specific exchange between Charlus and Jupien are wide-ranging, touching on elements of nature (a bee fertilizing an orchid, preening birds), society (foreigners meeting abroad), and politics (Dreyfusards). Amidst all of this metaphorical armature appears one reference that often draws critics’ attention (perhaps surprisingly so due to the relatively short space it occupies in the chapter). Having realized that the scene he is

observing is one of gay cruising, the narrator comments that inverts make up a kind of “Freemasonry”:

[F]ormant une franc-maçonnerie bien plus étendue, plus efficace et moins soupçonnée que celle des loges, car elle repose sur une identité de goûts, de besoins, d’habitudes, de dangers, d’apprentissage, de savoir, de trafic, de glossaire, et dans laquelle les membres mêmes qui souhaitent de ne pas se connaître, aussitôt se reconnaissent à des signes naturels ou de convention, involontaires ou voulus... (SG, 18-19)

The image of the society of inverts is one of a truly vast secret society – extensive, efficient, unsuspected – found in all parts of society, “dans le peuple, dans l’armée, dans le temple, au bain, sur le trône” (SG, 19). Given that this is just one among many metaphors the narrator draws upon to characterize the behavior of inverts, how are we to understand the specificity of the comparison with Freemasonry?

Part of what is at work in the Masonic analogy is an insistence on the signs and symbols that inverts use to recognize each other in the midst of a society that prosecutes their existence. These codes of recognition inevitably recall practices of a secret society, where the initiated are able to find each other through a mutually shared signal; one needs to be a member to understand them, otherwise they pass by unrecognized. Charlus and Jupien do not yet know that the other is an invert, and yet they are still able to recognize this quality in the other without saying a word. Sexual identity thus seems to communicate itself through an understanding of a law of secret recognition. Even prior to making the masonic comparison explicit, Proust’s narrator seems to allude to this belief: when Charlus and Jupien first size each other up, the narrator remarks on a “chose plus étonnante encore, l’attitude de M. Charlus ayant changé, celle de Jupien se mit aussitôt, *comme selon les lois d’un art secret*, en harmonie avec elle” (SG, 6, italics mine). The

mutual recognition between Charlus and Jupien, their corresponding change in attitude, would seem to reveal an occult practice, an understanding that both share. The fact that this reference arrives in a paragraph describing the two men's posturing as analogous to the plant or the bee demonstrates the persistence of secret social practice under the appearance of the natural. The exchange of glances, the jutting of a hip – seemingly unremarkable, “natural” occurrences – belie even within the narrator's description the presence of a ritual, arcane art that must be practiced in order to be understood. And as Eve Sedgwick has argued, this confusion between the “social” and the “natural” is one sign of a general muddling of the metaphors that Proust uses, one tied up with the contradictory ways in which sexual and gender categories get mapped out.<sup>6</sup> The tension implied in the articulation of homosexuality as both inherent inclination and learned practice can thus be understood as part of that confusion, one that is never fully resolved.

Beyond the principles of recognition, the reference to Masonry must also be understood as a continuation of another comparison that the narrator makes in “La Race des tantes,” suggesting that inverts are not so much an elected community as a race comparable to Jews. Both groups, he asserts, share the “fatality of race” stemming from original sin, and both play out a never-ending game of repulsion and attraction with the society around them (*SG*, 17). Inverts are like Jews, “se fuyant les uns les autres, recherchant ceux qui leur sont le plus opposés, qui ne veulent pas d’eux, pardonnant leurs rebuffades, s’enivrant de leurs complaisances; mais aussi rassemblés à leurs pareils par l’ostracisme qui les frappe, l’opprobre où ils sont tombés” (*SG*, 18). The narrator implies here that the bond between inverts is, like that of the Jews, founded on

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<sup>6</sup> In one such example, Sedgwick notes that Charlus is portrayed as a “true” woman while being compared to a male bird. See her *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 217-221.

a logic of attraction and repulsion: they flee each others' company in order to enter the very society that ostracizes them. Their society is, in effect, made of aversion as well as inversion.<sup>7</sup>

The semantic overlapping between inverts, Masons, and Jews was not at all of Proust's invention. As we saw in the Introduction, the linking of Jews to Freemasons as one vast conspiracy is an attack that has a long history, dating back in France to early nineteenth-century interpretations of the French Revolution. By the end of the nineteenth century, and in particular during the Dreyfus affair, the thought of an underground anti-Christian and anti-French association between Jews and Freemasons took hold within right-wing circles and publications.<sup>8</sup> The place of inverts within this conspiratorial framework is related to their stereotype as a secret community extending beyond national boundaries. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century political discourses had frequently stoked the fear of a gay presence, arguing that homosexuals were to be found everywhere, hidden in all countries and in all classes, much like Freemasons.<sup>9</sup> As an internationalist society like Masonry, inverts' loyalties were seen as dedicated to a secret cause, or to each other, but not to the nation. During the Eulenburg Affair, for example, Maximilien Harden, the influential editor and journalist behind the attack on the Kaiser's government, decried that homosexuals form "a comradeship which is stronger than that of the monastic orders and of Freemasonry, which holds closer and throws a bond across all the walls of creed, State and class, which unites the most remote, the most foreign, in a fraternal leagues of offence and

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<sup>7</sup> On this point, see Bersani's *Homos*, especially 129-136.

<sup>8</sup> See Frédéric Monier's *Complot dans la République* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 1998) for an analysis of the "conjuración judéo-maçonnique" of the turn of the century, in which he demonstrates that anti-Semitic myths of a Jewish plot are at the heart of the anti-Dreyfusard fear of a vast conspiracy grouping Freemasons, Protestants, and socialists. See pages 63-73.

<sup>9</sup> See J.E. Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 169-172.

defense.”<sup>10</sup> Thus the popular representation of homosexuality as a form of Masonry had an expressly political aim, indicating the treacherous and conspiratorial nature of a supranational group.

The frequent association between Jews and inverts in popular political and medical discourses provides a further dimension for Proust’s representation of the secret society of homosexuality. Through her reading of the *Recherche*, Hannah Arendt demonstrates the extent to which inverts and Jews were associated at the end of the nineteenth century, with both groups seen by members of bourgeois society as bearers of inherent differences, qualities of “Jewishness” or “inversion” which defined them as insular clans. As Arendt argues, this difference was treated in ambivalent fashion, with the groups simultaneously welcomed as a diversion from bourgeois society and castigated as bearers of vice.<sup>11</sup> This shared image of vice created overlapping cultural representations, with the figure of the Jewish male often portrayed as either effeminate or a sexual deviant, his “oriental” origin making him supposedly inclined to homosexuality.<sup>12</sup> Sexual deviancy, it was also suggested, had an implicit relationship to secrecy: Jews and inverts were seen as having hidden identities, forced to create signs, rituals, and symbols that allowed them to recognize each other.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Richard Lewinsohn, *A History of Sexual Customs*, trans. Alexander Mayce (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1958), 311. The same passage is also cited by Steakly in “Iconography of a Scandal,” 254; and by Rivers in *Proust and the Art of Love*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), 79-88.

<sup>12</sup> Morris Kaplan has demonstrated the extent to which the images of Jews and sexual minorities were associated throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See “Refiguring the Jewish Question: Arendt, Proust, and the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 105-133.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt suggests that the real use of secret languages and signs was a necessity for inverts, while the Jews’ identity was used only to give the appearance of mystery. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 85.

The three groups – Masons, Jews, and inverts – all evoke fears of societies within society, internal colonies that remain faithful to themselves rather than to the nation. This notion of a “state with a state” was, in fact, repeatedly invoked during the Dreyfus affair in order to claim the utter plausibility that Jews were unable to pay allegiance to the French state.<sup>14</sup> In conspiratorial discourses, Masons, inverts, and Jews are often posed as equivalent or synonymous groups: the “Judeo-Masonic” plot exists because Jews are, in fact, Masons, just as they are inverts, their differences collapsing under the weight of the conspiratorial reading. Through his series of analogies, Proust seems to allude to and reproduce this cultural discourse that neglects difference through a conspiratorial lens. J.E. Rivers goes so far to claim that Proust essentially accuses homosexuality of being nothing more than a secret plot to undermine all of society. For Rivers, Maximilien Harden’s image of a homosexual “worldwide conspiracy having evil designs on the rest of humanity is echoed in the *Recherche*.”<sup>15</sup> Such an assertion would certainly resonate with the critical, often biting ways in which the narrator comments on the shameful and traitorous relationships between inverts in “La Race des tantes.”<sup>16</sup> Yet harsh though he may be toward inverts, Proust does not simply rehash or (to use Rivers’s term) “echo” the fears of a widespread conspiracy held by Harden and others. Such a reading disregards the ways in which Proust introduces and explores a number of nuances and distinctions between these different groups. I would argue instead that Proust’s use of the masonic allusion has less to do with the idea of a political conspiracy of inverts, the notion that homosexuals are controlling

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<sup>14</sup> Erin Carlston shows how Proust represents these fears by portraying Jews and homosexuals as spies or traitors. While the issues Carlston raises are obviously informative to the discourse on the secret society, they remain somewhat distinct (spies tend to act alone in the service of a government, for example, as opposed to the union that the secret society represents). See her “Secret Dossiers: Sexuality, Race, and Treason in Proust and the Dreyfus Affair,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.4 (Winter 2002), 937-968.

<sup>15</sup> Rivers, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Bersani refers to Proust’s “gloomy (and bitchy) assessment of gay groups” in his *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 130.

history from behind the scenes, and more about how practices of initiation and interpretation function.

While “La Race des tantes” establishes connections between Jews, Masons, and inverts, it also resists a vision of these groups as one homogenized or monolithic force. For example, while inverts are like Jews in that both are inclined to lies and betrayal, the bond between inverts is superior to that of Masons because the former group shares a system of codes and a multitude of cultural traits. The inverts trump their secret society counterparts in that they are at once universal (“bien plus étendue...comptant des adhérents partout, dans le peuple, dans l’armée, dans le temple, au bain, sur le trône”) yet totally secret (“moins soupçonnée...tous obligés à porter leur secret, mais ayant leur part d’un secret des autres, que le reste de l’humanité ne soupçonne pas”) (*SG*, 18-19). The hallmarks of the paranoid critique of the secret society are present here: a group is present everywhere yet suspected nowhere. What’s more, the narrator insists on causality: they are more secret and more omnipresent because (“car”) they have an identity of tastes, needs, vocabulary, etc., rather than a more explicit or obvious commonality.

While the list of shared attributes may seem extensive, defining in particular forms of recognition and cultural knowledge, ideology is notably absent from the shared traits of inverts. In other words, politics is not invoked as a predetermining factor in the identification and bond between inverts. The narrator does not invoke Freemasonry in order to reproduce an idea of worldwide political conspiracy; rather, he suggests that the secret society formed by inverts serves to further their own culture of discernment. By the narrator’s own analogy, the meeting of inverts is instead like the high-school teacher who befriends the town notary over their shared love of chamber music, representing a “plaisir de s’instruire” (*SG*, 20). The resulting image suggests a secret society based more on initiation, or on mutual recognition, than on conspiracy.

The question of how one understands and recognizes will be addressed in more detail at the end of this chapter, but the notion of inverts as a community defined at least in part by their recognition of codes is of course one that resonates throughout the *Recherche*. Gilles Deleuze's reading of Proust's novel frames the story as one of apprenticeship, of decoding and explaining signs in order to get at the truth.<sup>17</sup> Here the inverts' signs appear complicated. They are at once "natural or conventional, involuntary or intended," yet they also appear to escape those who emit them: even inverts who wish to go unnoticed can nevertheless be recognized by their fellow members.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Proust's narrator is more shrewd than he wishes to let on: in previous volumes of the *Recherche*, he had demonstrated no such knowledge of same-sex attraction. Yet here he appears to fully recognize the "natural or conventional" signs of inversion, even to such an extent as being able to offer the "Race des tantes" as a knowledgeable commentary on the practices of inverts, suggesting that he himself might have already gone through a process of initiation into such a secret society.

If the narrator insists on the secret society of inverts as one based on practices of knowledge and initiation, this does not mean he completely neglects the political dimensions of his discourse. Such a commentary is present in this section, but it is often invoked in ambivalent ways, as if to blunt the political impact of the reference to Masonry. For example, the narrator suggests that there exists a spectrum of inverts much like the political spectrum ("comme 'l'Union des gauches' diffère de la 'Fédération socialiste'"), and one can thus speak of invert "extremists" who display their "true" feminine nature too audaciously in public (SG, 21). And yet the political analogy is not as clear-cut as it would first appear. First, its force is quickly

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<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Jarrod Hayes analyzes one such way that this plays out in the novel around "tea" and "tearoom" as signifiers and sites for gay sex. See his "Proust in the Tearoom," *PMLA*, vol. 110, n.5 (October 1995), 992-1005.



undercut by a second analogy based on a cultural organization (“et telle société de musique mendelssohnienne [diffère] de la Schola cantorum”): extremism is apparently not limited to political ideology but can be ascribed to matters of taste as well. Second, the extremists conflict with the image of inversion as an “efficacious” secret society, because they reveal to others outside of their circle their true nature: they “laissent passer un bracelet sous leur manchette, parfois un collier dans l’évasement de leur col.” These exterior signs of femininity may cause a “bande de collégiens à s’enfuir au plus vite,” but that repulsion is based on recognition and realization: the “extremists” are not hiding in plain sight, they are simply in plain sight, able to be recognized by even a group of adolescents. In other words, extremism in inversion would seem to conflict with the image of “une franc-maçonnerie...bien plus efficace...que celle des loges.”

The troublesome nature of the conspiratorial analogy persists, even when the narrator makes even more explicit political analogies, as when he repeats a comparison with Dreyfusards.<sup>19</sup> Here, he remarks that a waiter could hand both groups over to the police if it were not for the tips they promise, seeming to suggest that menace of inverts is not as pervasive as it may seem. In order for the group to be effective, the waiter must not be able to recognize them, and in order for them to be a true threat, a more serious bribe than tips would seem necessary. The narrator implies, then, that the society of inverts might resemble certain political models but that politics is not the point. Rather, he displays an almost willful blindness to the political implications of their organization:

Laissons pour le moment de côté ceux qui, le caractère exceptionnel de leur penchant les faisant se croire supérieurs à elles, méprisent les femmes, font de l’homosexualité le

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<sup>19</sup> Erin Carlston shows how accusations of homosexuality and sexual deviancy were used to attack Colonel Dreyfus during the Affair. See her “Secret Dossiers: Sexuality, Race, and Treason in Proust and the Dreyfus Affair.”

privilège des grands génies et des époques glorieuses et, quand ils cherchent à partager leur goût, le font moins à ceux qui leur semblent y être prédisposés, comme le morphinomane fait pour la morphine, qu'à ceux qui leur en semblent dignes, par zèle d'apostolat, comme d'autres prêchent le sionisme, le refus du service militaire, le saint-simonisme, le végétarisme et l'anarchie. (*SG*, 22)

Those inverts who appear most closely to clandestine political organizations – Zionists, Saint-Simonians, and anarchists in particular – are outliers of such “exceptional character” that they do not interest the narrator (“laissons pour le moment de côté...”). Their extremism is political only by analogy: their true audacity lies in the ways they treat women, or preach the superiority of homosexuals. As Julia Kristeva has argued, this rejection is part and parcel of the narrator's resistance here and elsewhere to easy forms of forced social identifications: the “unique experiences” and ambiguities at the heart of Proust would be wiped away by these exemplary and extreme forms of political life.<sup>20</sup> But it also suggests that one of the reasons that Proust resists completely “echoing” conspiratorial representations of sexuality is because of the ways in which those discourses reduce unique experience. If an invert is a Zionist, or an anarchist, he will lose the particular qualities that define his existence and identity.

This tension between at once speaking of and repudiating politics culminates in the famous “disclaimer” section that ends “La Race des tantes,” as the logic of simultaneous attraction and repulsion appears to undermine any pretensions to group unity, much less world conquest. Returning to the Biblical image of inverts as the inheritors of Sodom, the narrator reminds us again of their universality: “ces descendants des Sodomistes...se sont fixés sur toute la terre,” as uncountable as the grains of sand on Earth (*SG*, 33). Whereas some may see a vast network intent on overturning society, the narrator sees a group that ultimately turns upon itself.

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<sup>20</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Time and Sense*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 153.

Inverts have themselves penetrated other secret societies and clubs but take pains to distance themselves from other invert: “Ils ont eu accès à toutes les professions, et entrent si bien dans les clubs les plus fermés que, quand un sodomiste n’y est pas admis, les boules noires y sont en majorité celles de sodomistes, ayant hérité le mensonge qui permit à leurs ancêtres de quitter la ville maudite.” Rather than taking over from within, the invert’s shame causes them to exclude. Leo Bersani has interpreted this gesture through the lens of contemporary gay culture, seeing this self-exclusion as representative of an impediment to the creation of an eventual queer community.<sup>21</sup> But we should not forget that the narrator grounds the analogy in a specific historic context, namely the early twentieth-century Zionist movement. While it is true that invert form “dans tous les pays une colonie orientale, cultivée, musicienne, médisante,” the narrator insists on the limits of the analogy at work: “on a voulu provisoirement prévenir l’erreur funeste qui consisterait, de même qu’on a encouragé un mouvement sioniste, à créer un mouvement sodomiste et à rebâtir Sodome” (ibid.). A “Sodomite movement” could not work – could not be “*efficace*” – because “à peine arrivés, les sodomistes quitteraient la ville pour ne pas avoir l’air d’en être,” and life would seem as it does in European cities. The “erreur funeste” that the narrator safeguards against would seem to mute the political aspirations of invert as group. The vice they represent may, for the narrator, exist, but it represents more a desire for initiation than a conspiratorial intent.

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Proust’s representation of inversion as a sort of secret society thus makes reference to discourses that frame it as a political conspiracy, but it ultimately rejects such an equation. We can see this move as a political gesture, a means of participating in while subtly undermining narratives that claim sexual minorities as a subversive element within society, narratives that

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<sup>21</sup> See Bersani’s *Homos*.

persist to this day in contemporary right-wing attacks on the “homosexual agenda.” Part of what Proust brings to this study of secret societies is an awareness of the ways in which paranoid discourses are produced, demonstrating an understanding of these discourses as both literary and cultural topoi. From the beginning of the comparison between inversion and Freemasonry, Proust stresses how the shared secret of inverts can be compared to fictional narratives: “[T]ous obligés à protéger leur secret, mais ayant leur part d’un secret que le reste de l’humanité ne soupçonne pas et qui fait qu’à eux les romans d’aventure les plus invraisemblables semblent vrais” (*SG*, 19). The reference to adventure novels has the intent of underlining the secrecy of inverts: their secret is so imperceptible that it makes an adventure novel seem realistic. It is a comparison that is reinforced by the narrator’s assertion that they lead “une vie romanesque,” one where “l’ambassadeur est ami du forçat” (*ibid*). I don’t think that this choice of image is arbitrary: the “romanesque” at work here in the reference is most likely to a specific adventure novel, namely Balzac’s *Ferragus*, the first novel of *L’Histoire des Treize*, in which the eponymous leader of the Treize is a convict who resides at the Portuguese embassy. By referring back to one of the foundational fictional texts involving conspiracies, Proust’s narrator demonstrates a keen awareness of the ways in which discourses of conspiracy are primarily about fiction, a suggestion that subtly questions how these narratives are constructed. Just as he references the fictional secret society of Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*, so popular discourses will inevitably draw on other stories.

The narrator’s intimate knowledge of the structures and forms of conspiratorial discourses is made abundantly clear in the way in which he articulates his epiphany about Charlus’s inversion. If the interaction between Charlus and Jupien serves as a description of a meeting of two members of a secret society, it operates under a logic of false security: the two

men are observed the entire time by the narrator, who has hidden above them in the hopes of seeing a bee fertilize an orchid. The narrator's hidden stance imposes a double necessity of secrecy on the scene: Charlus and Jupien have their clandestine encounter while the narrator remains furtively concealed. Given the constraints of the situation – the fact that knowing themselves observed will cause Jupien and Charlus to abandon their game – the narrator is at pains to make himself unseen and unheard, and to make us know of his efforts: from his initial position where he is assured that “personne ne pouvait me voir” (SG, 4) he changes position, presses against walls, hides in the shadows “en tachant de ne pas être vu,” (SG, 9) “pour qu’il [Charlus] ne pût m’apercevoir” (SG, 6). This insistence upon the visual logic of the scene – seeing while remaining unseen on the one hand, being observed while believing yourself hidden on the other – is one that critics have highlighted in order to show how Proust's notion of homosexuality presents something of a glass closet, a secret known by all.<sup>22</sup> But it also has a resonance with myths of secret societies, which often function through the representation of enclosed, hidden spaces: the Masonic lodge represents the literal location of the conspiratorial plot. Here, however, the courtyard is open; if inversion is a secret society, it would appear to be one taking place in plain view, perceptible even to the casual observer, with the narrator's position and gaze delineating the limits of the space of the secret encounter.

The narrator's insistence on his own location seems to suggest that he understands how one's position determines one's interpretation of an event. He reminds us that he must remain hidden, that he presses himself against the wall, that he runs dangerously across the courtyard in order not to lose sight of the men, that he perches himself on a ladder next to the room where they have sex. His vantage point would seem the most important aspect of his observations:

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<sup>22</sup> See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 227-231, as well as Elisabeth Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 62-69.

because he can see everything in the scene, he can effectively relate it. Yet the epiphany that strikes the narrator demonstrates that he understands this not to be the case: “Dès le début de cette scène une révolution, pour mes yeux dessillés, s’était opérée en M. de Charlus, aussi complète, aussi immédiate que s’il avait été touché par une baguette magique. Jusque-là, parce que je ne n’avais pas compris, je n’avais pas vu” (*SG*, 15). What he suggests here is that understanding does not follow observation; instead, because he lacks the particular lens through which to see the scene, he cannot see it. Realization of something previously unrecognized provides the lens through which subsequent events can be understood. By his own comparison, the narrator resembles the man who fails to see the growing stomach of his expecting neighbor until the moment when someone mentions pregnancy: “Soudain il aperçoit le ventre, et *ne verra plus que lui*” (*ibid.*, my italics). Rather than provide a richer, more complex appreciation, “understanding” seems here to suggest a more limited, focused view: the pregnant stomach, or the invert’s effeminate nature, predetermines all the future ways in which interactions can occur. As Antoine Compagnon has suggested, the narrator eventually falls victim to this type of thinking: “Le héros de *Sodome et Gomorrhe* apprend vite que ‘la race des tantes’ est beaucoup plus nombreuse qu’il ne l’avait d’abord soupçonné; il a même tendance à la voir partout.”<sup>23</sup>

This method of comprehension, by which discernment determines observation, affects not only the interpretation of subsequent events but also that of previous ones. Once he realizes Charlus’s true nature, the narrator “re-reads” his own history with the baron:

Rétrospectivement les hauts et les bas eux-mêmes de ses relations avec moi, tout ce qui avait paru jusque-là incohérent à mon esprit, devenait intelligible, se montrait évident comme une phrase, n’offrant aucun sens tant qu’elle reste décomposée en lettres

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<sup>23</sup> Antoine Compagnon, *Proust entre deux siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 275.

disposées au hasard, exprime, si les caractères se trouvent replacés dans l'ordre qu'il faut, une pensée que l'on ne pourra plus oublier. (*SG*, 16)

The narrator's commentary on his own thought process, the way that the incoherencies of his past relationship with Charlus have been made intelligible by his present understanding. His insistence on the written aspect of understanding, the ways in which his interpretation resembles a well-ordered sentence, demonstrates how narratives can be formed to make sense.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, this act of understanding is not just about the logic of paranoid narratives. Interpretation in Proust often works in this manner: what has previously not made sense, what seems to escape notice, suddenly becomes a thought we cannot forget and a thought that will eclipse all other thoughts. But I would argue that the narrator's focus here on his own understanding of Charlus's inversion – clearly meant for the personal or affective domain – then cannot help but affect the logic of the conspiracy theory that undergirds the paranoid representations that abound in “*La Race des tantes*”: one's interpretation will determine the facts that one sees.<sup>25</sup>

### **“Fondre cela dans une seule et même intrigue...”**

If Proust's rather brief reference to Masonry seems to attract critical attention, the titular society of Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* has suffered from a different fate. Rather than analyzing the group head-on, critics often pass over its activities in favor of its products, namely the fake coins circulating in the novel. For example, in his reading of Gide's novel as a literary

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<sup>24</sup> Compare the narrator's image of a well-ordered sentence to Raoul Girardet's description of the conspiracy theory: “Tous les faits, quel que soit l'ordre dont ils relèvent, se trouvent ramenés, par une logique apparemment inflexible, à une même et unique causalité, à la fois élémentaire et toute-puissante.” *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 54-55.

<sup>25</sup> In this sense, it could be argued that the truly secret society of the novel is not so much composed of inverts but lesbians. As Elisabeth Ladenson has shown, the forms and practices of lesbian sexuality always remain outside of the narrator's comprehension, with the result that he literally cannot see them. See *Proust's Lesbianism*, especially chapter 3.

testament to the loss of the gold standard in France, Jean-Joseph Goux analyzes the scene in which the character Bernard considers a counterfeit coin:

The book is stamped with a claim to compositional purity, *with the metaphor of the title* [my italics] – like the guarantee of measure stamped on a coin, its legend or title, which *entitles* the bearer to a certain value. It is not simply language that is compared to money...but a certain novelistic language that becomes increasingly problematic for [Gide's fictional novelist] Edouard and that is implicitly metaphorized in the counterfeit coin.<sup>26</sup>

Goux is undoubtedly correct that the novel poses the counterfeit coin as a metaphor for language that attempts to represent reality, but he makes a subtle yet important shift from speaking of the metaphor of the title to the metaphor of the coin, which he goes on to explore in all of its semantic richness. And yet the metaphor implied in the title is not the title itself: Gide did not name his novel *La Fausse monnaie* but rather *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*.<sup>27</sup> This slippage may suggest that the title is something of a red herring: as Bernard says to Edouard while discussing the fictional novelist's own book bearing the same name, "Ce titre pourtant semblait annoncer une histoire..." (*FM*, 316). The title does announce one narrative strain of many in the novel, the circulation of false coins by bourgeois youth organized by the avant-garde writer Strouvilhou. Yet both Edouard and Gide refuse to deliver on the promise announced by the title; the narrative arc of the secret group of counterfeiters takes a back seat to the stories of Bernard's evolution of self-discovery, the budding love affair between Edouard and his nephew Olivier,

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Joseph Goux, *The Coiners of Language*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Gide obviously reflected on the choice of the group in the title, having first announced in 1913 (in the flyleaf for *Les Caves du Vatican*) that he would be publishing a book entitled *Le Faux-Monnayeur*, ultimately shifting the reader's attention from an apparent tale of individual morality to one where groups and the social are implicated. See Daniel Moutote, *Réflexions sur Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1990), 37-38.



and the tragic life and death of the young boy Boris. The eclipsing of the counterfeiters has led some critics to argue that the novel is too complex for its own good, containing so many disparate stories that the counterfeit ring has no other option but to remain on the margins of the narrative.<sup>28</sup> I would argue, however, that the role of the counterfeiters can only be understood in relation to the other secret societies that the novel portrays.

The seeming unimportance of the young counterfeiters is explained in part by Edouard in one of the central chapters of the novel, in which he describes his novelistic project to Bernard, Laura, and Sophroniska. His goal is to create a novel that represents its own efforts at representing: “Ce que je veux, c’est présenter d’une part la réalité, présenter d’autre part cet effort pour la styliser” (*FM*, 313). This technique, which Gide referred to in his *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs* as a “double foyer,” places the novel closer to a *roman d’idées* than a typical realist novel, a consequence Edouard accepts.<sup>29</sup> This technique, combined with the rejection of a proper “subject” of the novel, manages to eclipse characters through ideas, as evidenced by Edouard’s own difficulty in defining precisely who are the counterfeiters of his title. When asked directly by Bernard to identify them, Edouard replies, “Eh bien! Je n’en sais rien,” before the narrator clarifies further:

A vrai dire, c’est à certains de ses confrères qu’Edouard pensait d’abord, en pensant aux faux-monnayeurs ; et singulièrement au vicomte de Passavant. Mais l’attribution s’était bientôt considérablement élargie ; suivant que le vent de l’esprit soufflait ou de Rome ou d’ailleurs, ses héros tour à tour devenaient prêtres ou franc-maçons. Son cerveau, s’il

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Philip Thody’s “*Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: The Theme of Responsibility,” *Modern Language Review*, vol. 5, no. 33 (July 1960): 351-358.

<sup>29</sup> In his *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide writes: “C’est autour de deux foyers, à la manière des ellipses, que ces efforts se polarisent. D’une part l’événement, le fait, la donnée extérieure; d’autre part, l’effort même du romaniser pour faire un livre avec ça.” (*JFM*, 537) On the notion of the “double foyer,” see Alain Goulet’s *Lire Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (Paris: Dunod, 1994), 125-127.

l'abandonnait à sa pente, chavirait vite dans l'abstrait, où il se vautrait tout à l'aise. Les idées de change, de dévalorisation, d'inflation, peu à peu envahissaient son livre...où elles usurpaient la place des personnages. (*FM*, 316)

Thus the counterfeiters are originally conceived of as fellow writers, and given the artistic pretensions of Passavant, those writers who purport to represent reality while in truth they are merely inventing fictions.<sup>30</sup> Edouard's original idea figures writers as a group that plots together to deceive its public: the circulation of false money requires its explicit fabrication and an intent, as well as the collaboration and participation of others (such as the youths who circulate the money). Yet Edouard's fancy takes him towards a more vast notion of counterfeiters, "priests or freemasons" (a reference to Gide's own work *Les Caves du Vatican*). The gradual shift from groups to ideas, moving from the specific example of a character in the novel to a character in a novel by Gide to the abstract notion of currency, indicates where Edouard's real interest lies: the importance is not so much on the group but in what one makes of the group. What's more, it is the narrator who indicates to us where Edouard's mind goes, in a not entirely sympathetic manner: his "penchant" for ideas is presented as a capsizing ("chavirer"), something to be wallowed in ("se vautrer"), while ideas "invade" the novel. In a text in which the characters of the counterfeiting group are so often eclipsed by the theory of the novel, this subtle critique would seem to be offered as something of a self-critique.

Yet the counterfeiters are not the only secret group in the narrative. A few chapters later, Edouard relates through his journal the backstory of Boris, the headmaster's grandson that Edouard has gone to Switzerland to fetch. The presentation of Boris's life immediately follows a further expansion on Edouard's ideas on the novel. First, the novelist writes about "le sujet profond" of his novel: "C'est, ce sera sans doute la rivalité du monde réel et de la représentation

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<sup>30</sup> Edouard refers to Passavant as "moins un artiste qu'un faiseur" (*FM*, 222).

que nous nous en faisons. La manière dont le monde des apparences s'impose à nous et dont nous tentons d'imposer au monde extérieur notre interprétation particulière, fait le drame de notre vie" (*FM*, 326-327). The opposition between facts and interpretation lies at the heart of Edouard's (and Gide's novel). Jean-Joseph Goux refers to this as the "aesthetic forgery" of the novel, the constant hesitation between alleged transparency and actual representation.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, counterfeiting symbolizes this opposition: the coin is in reality worth nothing while we ascribe to it a given value. A similar questioning is at work with our interpretation of the role of the counterfeiters in the novel: we think that they will have consequence, or influence, and yet in reality they do not.

This clarification of Edouard's novel's subject is juxtaposed with the story of a second secret society, a narrative connection that will bring us back to the question of sexuality. In this section, Edouard relates what the analyst Sophroniska has told him about the origins of Boris's tics and obsessions, the behavioral oddities that she hopes to cure him of. According to Sophroniska, the origin of Boris's neuroses lies in his discovery of masturbation, a discovery that is presented by her (through Edouard) as an entrance into a secret society of magic:

[Boris] s'est lié avec un camarade de classe, un certain Baptistin Kraft, d'un ou deux ans plus âgé que lui, qui l'a initié à des pratiques clandestines, que ces enfants, naïvement émerveillés, croyaient être 'de la magie.' C'est le nom qu'ils donnaient à leur vice, pour avoir entendu dire, ou lu, que la magie permet d'entrer mystérieusement en possession de ce que l'on désire, qu'elle illimite la puissance. (*FM*, 327)

The passage into manhood then implies an introduction into knowledge, an initiation into new practices, but the actual object those practices, the object of desire, remains unclear: in a novel notable for its open depiction of same-sex relations, Boris's initiation does not carry the

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<sup>31</sup> Goux, 68.

explicitly gay overtones of, say, Proust's reference.<sup>32</sup> I would argue that this inchoate form of desire is precisely the point: the "naïve" children seek to gain possession of something they lack, but the objet of sexual desire remains unformed. In fact, this lack of precision leads us back to Gide's arguments on pederasty, his preferred term for speaking of same-sex relationships exemplified in the novel by the love between Edouard and his younger nephew Olivier: when desire is first aroused in adolescents, Gide suggests, it has no object attached to it.<sup>33</sup>

The discovery of forbidden knowledge is, of course, a common trope in speaking about sexuality, but what's interesting here is the framing and terminology employed by Edouard. If Boris and his friend give the term "magic" to describe their onanistic practices, the reader remains unsure if it is either Edouard or Sophroniska who describe it as an "initiation" into "clandestine" activities. Edouard explicitly states that he pressed Sophroniska for the precise terms that Boris used, but that she was unable to reproduce them while nevertheless certifying their exactitude. I would argue that this is an important and intended obfuscation: an analyst calling sexual practices between boys an initiation into a clandestine activity would have a much different interpretation than if a gay writer were to do, implying an authority derived from medical and political discourses that help definitions of sexual identity.. The ways in which the novel frames identifying sexual practices as an initiation can be read as suggesting a resistance to narratives that also read it as conspiratorial.

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<sup>32</sup> Although in a novel where onomastics run wild, could not the name of Boris's friend be at once a reference to "power" (*Kraft* in German) and to Krafft-Ebbing, theorist of sexual perversion and one of the first coiners of the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual"? As Michael Lucey notes, one of the games critics like to play with *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is to "discover" all of the homosexual characters, a game he himself indulges in when considering Boris. See chapter 4 of his *Gide's Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Gide articulated this explicitly in *Corydon*, when he argues that adolescent sexual desire, without undue influence, would more often develop into homosexuality. As the titular character puts it, "l'appétit qui se réveille en l'adolescent n'est pas d'une bien précise exigence." *Corydon*, in *Romans et récits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 125-126.

In addition to the actual act of masturbation, part of Boris's practices involved the use of a written incantation, written on a piece of parchment in Baptistin's handwriting: "GAZ. TÉLÉPHONE. CENT MILLE ROUBLES." Sophroniska makes an effort to understand what these words mean, but Boris only responds: "Mais ça ne veut rien dire. C'est de la magie" (*FM*, 328). In Sophroniska's telling of the story, much emphasis is placed on the fact that the formula is written down by Baptistin: "cinq mots en caractères majuscules, enfantins, et soignés." The written nature of the talisman returns at the end of the novel in the context of yet another secret society, the Confrérie des Hommes forts, a group founded by several of Boris's classmates with the intention of essentially tormenting him. Having received the talisman from his cousin Strouvillhou (who had received it from Sophroniska), the group's ringleader, Ghéridanisol, redraws the words inside "une large bordure rouge et noire, laquelle était ornée de petits diabolins obscènes" in order to give it "un aspect fantastique, 'diabolique'" (*FM*, 456). Here, the purported "magical" meaning has been made manifest yet falsified: Ghéridanisol drew the images because he thought them "susceptible[s] de bouleverser Boris." Instead of pleasure, or an initiation into sexual practices, Boris is introduced to a test of virility: to become part of the Confrérie des Hommes forts, whose motto is "L'homme fort ne tient pas à la vie," Boris must demonstrate to his peers that he does not fear risking his life, ultimately shooting himself through a game of Russian roulette.

How are we then to understand the way in which the novel poses these overlapping secret societies of counterfeiting, sexual awakening, and tragic tests of virility? First, they are all bound together by the thread of writing: the counterfeiting authors of Edouard's novel, the written and re-written words on Boris's talisman. More fundamentally, writing represents for Gide the disjunction between reality and interpretation, as made even clearer when Edouard

comments on Boris and Baptistin's practices of masturbation: "Ils croyaient de bonne foi avoir découvert un secret qui consolât de l'absence *réelle* par la présence *illusoire*, et s'hallucinaient à plaisir et s'extasiaient sur un vide que leur imagination surmenée bondait de merveilles, à grand renfort de volupté" (*FM*, 327, my emphasis). "Real" absence confronted with the illusion the boys imagine recalls the clash between the real world and representation we make of it that figures as the central problem of Edouard's novel. In this sense, we should take Boris at his word when he says that the words do not mean anything, that they are just magic: while it may appear that he says this to exclude Sophroniska, to keep her on the margins of their group, it is also true that they have no real value except for the interpretation Boris gives to them, using them as a "talisman" in his sexual practices.

Yet the tragedy of Boris lies in the fact that his secret society of initiation becomes distorted. Boris's obsessions initially come from the fact that he believes his sexual acts to have consequence, to have caused the death of his father: "Boris s'est persuadé que ses pratiques secrètes, qu'on lui peignait comme si coupables, avaient reçu leur châtiment" (*FM*, 329). In other words, he accepts the idea of personal consequence: his belief in the culpability of his sexual desires leads to his desire to again join another group, to belong to a community of men. Yet the Confrérie des Hommes forts is not founded on any actual learning but merely on its appearance. The youths use pretensions of exclusion, repeating "Il ne comprendrait pas. Il n'oserait pas. Il ne saurait pas" (*FM*, 455) around Boris to both provoke Boris and keep him at bay. As I have suggested, the novel suggests knowledge as the foundation for understanding sexuality as a secret society: Boris must be "initiated" into practices of masturbation by his friend. Here, however, there is nothing to learn, just the appearance of a deeper knowledge that

both attracts and repels Boris.<sup>34</sup> They become, in other words, a counterfeit secret society, a funhouse mirror of the initial sexual awakening that Boris had experienced before.<sup>35</sup> In the end, Gide describes sexual practices through the lens of the secret society to do two important tasks: first, to illustrate the theme of initiation, the idea that sexuality and sexual practices must be a form of knowledge; and second, to see how meaning is assigned to sexual desire, how sexual acts can take on a particular import based on the interpretation that they are given.

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But if Gide's novel stresses above all the initiatory elements of secret societies, how then are we to understand the end of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, in particular Boris's suicide? While the novel seems at first glance to suggest a relationship of causality between the Confrérie and Boris's death, I would argue that it ultimately pushes back against such an interpretation, at once suggesting causality while negating it. As I mentioned in this chapter's introduction, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* was inspired by two historical events: a Luxembourg counterfeiting ring and the suicide of a French high school student. The question of causality in the suicide was explicitly raised in one interpretation of the event, offered by Maurice Barrès, the right-wing nationalist and anti-Dreyfusard. After the case had gained a certain amount of coverage, Barrès used the story as a sign of France's moral decline. In one speech, he referred to the school-group secret society as "une conspiration entre jeunes désespérés," one that is hiding another, more insidious plot: the professorial and intellectual class that attacks the foundations of society by subversively

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<sup>34</sup> Part of Ghéridanisol's dislike for Boris stems from the latter's own naïveté about sexuality: he believes that "une femme à poil" means a bearded woman rather than a naked woman (*FM*, 456).

<sup>35</sup> For the classic analysis of the mirror as a symbol for Gide's literary techniques in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, see Lucien Dallenbach's *Le Récit spéculaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 45-51.

inculcating ideas hostile to France's traditional values.<sup>36</sup> Barrès's argument reproduces, then, the typical structure of conspiratorial discourses: an actual tragedy, with the proof of a dead young boy, is taken to be the outward but perhaps not so visible sign of another force a work – a small conspiracy – that itself masks another, more vast plot. It also establishes a firm line of causality: the educational class has, through the corruption of French morals, led to a conspiracy that caused the death of an innocent victim.

For Gide, the case of suicide presents above all a challenge for the construction of his novel. In his *Journal des Faux-monnayeurs*, he suggests that the two events ought to have some sort of connection: “Il s’agit de rattacher cela [the Luxembourg ring] à l’affaire des faux-monnayeurs anarchistes du 7 et 8 août 1907, -- et à la sinistre histoire des suicides des écoliers de Clermont-Ferrand (5 juin 1909). Fondre cela dans une seule et même intrigue” (*JFM*, 525). Particularly given the mutually scandalous natures of the *fait divers*, we could expect some sort of causality in the effort of combining the two events: the counterfeiters lead to the suicide, or vice versa. Yet what the novel consistently demonstrates is a total lack of real consequence to the actions of either the counterfeiters or the Confrérie des hommes forts, particularly concerning Boris's death. For the Confrérie to have any sort of real influence, for the conspiracy to be a true conspiracy, Boris must be kept in the dark: he must not know that the gun is loaded, that the other youths are conspiring against him. Yet from the moment when Georges first reveals to him the group's slogan – “L’homme fort ne tenait pas à la vie” – Boris knows that something is afoot: “Dès cet instant, il commença de douter des autres; il commença de se douter que les autres se réservaient et n’y allaient pas de franc jeu” (*FM*, 459). The doubt he feels at the challenge laid at

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<sup>36</sup> On the suicide and its various literary manifestations, see Pierre Masson, “Du bon usage du suicide: Barrès, Bordeaux et Gide autour d’un cadavre,” *Bulletin des Amis d’André Gide* 55 (July 1982): 335-346. Masson underlines how the conspiratorial framework that Barrès gave the suicide differed from the *Journal de Rouen*'s reporting on the event, which described the group of youths as “une association malfaisante de quelques gamins,” rather a secret plot.



his feet by Georges finds confirmation when his name alone is drawn from a hat for the challenge with the pistol (Ghéridanisol has secretly added his name to an extra piece of paper): “A quoi bon protester? Il savait qu’il était perdu... C’était couru” (*FM*, 460). Yet Boris nevertheless carries out the act, as if controlled by something beyond him: “Il marchait à pas lents, *comme un automate*, le regard fixe” (*FM*, 462, my emphasis). Despite his understanding of the event, Boris cannot stop himself. Even the description of Boris’s suicide evacuates the idea of individual consequence: “Le coup partit. Boris ne s’affaissa pas aussitôt. Un instant le corps se maintint, comme accroché dans l’encoignure; puis la tête, retombée sur l’épaule, l’emporta; tout s’effondra” (*FM*, 463). As Michael Lucey argues, the entire passage stresses a depersonalization of Boris: at first he does not collapse, against the logic of his action; then, when gravity does take hold, it is Boris’s body that is held upright, then the head that is carried downwards, and lastly “everything” that dissolves.<sup>37</sup>

Critics have read this scene as a rejection of the notion of character motivation by Gide: the chain of cause for Boris’s suicide has many links, diverging in several different directions, from his own agency to the involvement of Ghéridanisol, Strouvillou, Sophroniska, Bernard, Broja and beyond. This novel makes it impossible to say exactly *why* Boris committed suicide, and this is part of the point: if ideas replace characters in the novel, then individual psychological motivations become difficult to determine.<sup>38</sup> But to extend this questioning of motivation beyond just the novel, Gide also demonstrates an awareness that narratives of history are constructed, particularly in the context of secret societies. The historical horizon of *Les Faux-monnayeurs* has long intrigued critics: Gide aimed to portray the problems of contemporary

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<sup>37</sup> See Lucey’s *Gide’s Bent*, 139-142. Lucey reads this scene through the lens of Boris’s sexuality, arguing that his death represents the ways in which sexual development resists narratives of clear consequentiality.

<sup>38</sup> See both Lucey’s *Gide’s Bent*, and Daniel Walker, *André Gide* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 153-160.

society, but he also aimed for a timeless, eternal contemporary. Moreover, although it was written in 1925, the action must logically take place prior to World War I, when gold coins were still in circulation in France.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while history has a role in the novel, it seems only to determine a milieu for counterfeiters (since their existence is impossible after the war) rather than a theater for a demonstration of their influence. To this point, one scene among the youths just prior to Boris's suicide underlines the tenuous relationship between the novel's secret society and history. One of the boys, Phiphi,

déchira une demi-feuille de son cahier d'histoire qu'il avait devant lui – car il avait à préparer un examen ; mais les lignes se brouillaient devant ses yeux, les faits et les dates dans sa tête – le bas d'une feuille, et très vite, écrivit dessus : « Tu es bien sûr au moins que le pistolet n'est pas chargé ? », puis tendit le billet à Georges qui le passa à Ghéri. Mais celui-ci, après l'avoir lu, haussa les épaules sans même regarder Phiphi, puis du billet fit une boulette qu'une pichenette envoya rouler juste à l'endroit marqué par la craie. (*FM*, 462)

Representations of secret societies traditionally serve to organize narratives, yet for Phiphi, history literally remains incomprehensible: facts, dates, and timelines are foggy in his mind. Even his personal history, the plot he participates in, escapes him: he has the feeling that something bad is about to happen and even has his finger on the element of consequence, the fact that the gun should not be loaded. But his attempt to understand both history and the present moment – the writing of his question on his history homework – is literally discarded by

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<sup>39</sup> On the historical horizon in the novel, see Alain Goulet's *Faux-Monnayeurs, mode d'emploi* (Paris: Sedes, 1991), 78-83. In his *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide writes: “ ‘Une peinture exacte de l'état des esprit savant la guerre – non; quand bien même je la pourrai réussir, ce n'est point là ma tâche; l'avenir m'intéresse plus que le passé, et plus encore ce qui n'est pas non plus de demain que d'hier mais qu'en tout temps l'on puisse dire: d'aujourd'hui.' ” (*JFM*, 253).

Ghèridanisol: the gesture seems to be Ghèridanisol's way of saying: the point of this exercise is exclusion, or risk, or valor, but it is above all not about making sense of history.

At its heart, Gide's questioning of the plausible relationship of causality at work in Boris's suicide is about the construction of narrative, of how the cause-and-effect at work in novels is part of their artificiality. In this sense, I would argue that the secret society plays an important role for Gide in the development of his thought on the novel's effort at representing reality. The typical use of conspiracies and secret societies is to establish a clear relationship of cause-and-effect, but the problem with Boris's suicide is that this relationship remains unclear. While I think that Gide's primary interest is literary, I would also propose the possibility of reading a political interpretation into his use of the story, suggesting a challenge to paranoid discourses like Barrès's which seek to use conspiratorial narratives in the service of vision of moralizing rhetoric. This critique would thus seem of a pair with the scene in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* in which Bernard is led by an angel to a nationalist meeting but eventually finds its moralizing discourse too politically rigid and ultimately unpersuasive. These discourses are ultimately unappealing because they assert an authority that they should not have. In his final commentary on Boris's suicide, Edouard writes that he will not make use of the event in his *Faux-Monnayeurs*: "Je voudrais n'offrir aucun fait sans une motivation suffisante" (*FM*, 464). Gide, of course, does make use of the tragedy, and by placing the event within a larger story of a conspiracy, Gide allows us to extend the breakdown of logic to a level beyond the individual character: the relationship between cause and effect is not so easily determined, motivations remain obscured, combining different strands into a single plotline resists our efforts.

In his analysis of political conspiracy theories, Raoul Girardet characterizes the paranoid discourse as one of distance between facts and interpretation: “Ce qui ne peut toutefois manquer d’étonner, c’est l’ampleur du hiatus existant entre la constatation de ces faits, tels qu’ils peuvent être objectivement établis, et la vision qui en est donnée à travers le récit mythologique.”<sup>40</sup> This “hiatus” between facts and the interpretation given to them is, I would argue, at the center of Proust and Gide’s representation of sexual secret societies. But their interest lies not so much in a preoccupation with advancing a particular vision of history or ideology, as is typically the case with conspiratorial discourses.<sup>41</sup> Instead, they lay bare the means by which these discourses are constructed, demonstrating both an awareness and skepticism of the specific rhetorical and logical presuppositions of representations of secret societies. Instead of creating narratives that explain and explicate difficulties of politics and history, Proust and Gide’s novels problematize the ways in which facts become interpreted. In reminding us of the ways in which one detail – the effeminate face, the pregnant stomach – can determine both past and future sight, Proust reveals the logic of the conspiracy theory: one’s understanding, one’s interpretation of events, becomes the focal point around which all meaning is filtered, organized, and displayed. This realization by the narrator explains in part the obsessive nature of the “Race des tantes” commentary, but it also makes his own refusal of political and historical agency even more telling, as it clearly indicates to the reader that a subscription to such a belief is above all an act of interpretation, one grounded in a literary and cultural history of other conspiracy theories.

The particular insistence on the part of both Proust and Gide on representing homosexuals as a secret society while simultaneously revealing the logic at work in such

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<sup>40</sup> Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> As Antoine Compagnon remarks, “Proust est l’un des écrivains qui ont nié l’histoire avec le plus de vigueur.” See his *Proust entre deux siècles*, 23.

discourses is not, I would argue, coincidental. Through their appropriation of the topos of sexual secret societies, Proust and Gide are able to stress non-conspiratorial ways that sexuality can be defined through its group practices: the mutual recognition of Proust's inverts, the initiation into and eventual corruption of sexual awareness by Boris. This runs counter in many ways to typical discourses surrounding sexual minorities that were, as we have seen, fraught with negative associations that implied homosexuality as an immoral, secret, and subversive influence at work within society: a gay *camarilla* has to be behind the foreign policy of Wilhelm's Germany, just as Jews and inverts are secret agents of vice. But with Proust and Gide, the political or historical agency typically ascribed to secret societies is largely absent; they instead choose to highlight the aesthetic, interpersonal, or erotic functions; in other words, they prioritize the element of initiation over that of influence.

Proust and Gide's resistance to an equation of sexuality and conspiracy can be understood in aesthetic terms, their rejection of paranoid narratives resonating with their more extensive questioning of the traditional realist novel that their *oeuvres* exemplify. But I would also argue that their focus on sexual secret societies is motivated at least in part by their knowledge of this topos writing as gay authors representing same-sex relationships, as writers who were themselves seen as the symbol of the immoral and decadent influence of homosexuality in modern society. Gide in particular was the object of a fierce polemic by right-wing writers at the beginning of the 1920s who saw his *Nouvelle Revue Française* as harboring homosexual and elitist authors undermining "le génie français."<sup>42</sup> In the novel, as we saw, the immoral and decadent writer Robert de Passavant (normally interpreted as a thinly veiled portrait of Cocteau) is represented as part of the counterfeiting ring; yet even the immorality that the novel ascribes to him fails to have any sort of real consequence. In other words, I would suggest,

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<sup>42</sup> See Gisèle Saprio, *La Guerre des écrivains* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 127-132.

the ways in which Gide's and Proust's texts demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the forms and constructs that define the topos of the sexual secret society stems from the fact that they are writing from within it, rather than projecting a fantasy on to another group. At a time when political discourse equates homosexuality with conspiracy, both Proust and Gide make knowing, glancing references to a similar discourse while choosing to stress a less charged vision of sexual practices.

### Chapter 3

#### The Secret and the Manifesto: From Surrealism to Contre-Attaque

In 1928 André Breton and Louis Aragon were asked to participate in a benefit for the widow of the silent-film actor René Cresté, an invitation which resulted in one of the forgotten works of surrealism, the collaborative play *Le Trésor des Jésuites*. Conceived of as a sort of end-of-the-year review of various *faits divers* and filled with cinematic references, *Le Trésor des Jésuites* was also intended to serve as a theatrical vehicle for the surrealist idol Musidora, remembered most often for her iconic turn as Irma Vep, the mysterious member of the underground criminal gang in Louis Feuillade's serial film *Les Vampires*. Due to various conflicts, including Cresté's widow's apprehension at the prospect of surrealist troublemaking, the plan to stage the play was eventually tabled in favor of a benefit film series. Breton and Aragon would nevertheless go on to publish *Le Trésor des Jésuites* in a special edition of the journal *Variétés* dedicated to "Le Surréalisme en 1929," and, as a literary text, it remains one of the movement's more interesting if neglected documents.<sup>1</sup>

Following a prologue featuring Time and Eternity discussing the importance of cinema, the play portrays three "tableaux," each progressing by a period of 11 years: a 1917 encounter in a hotel between the military deserter Simon and his love interest, the mysterious Mad Souris (played by the anagrammatic Musidora), a scene culminating in a murder; a 1928 dialogue between Time, Eternity, and Mad Souris on film and various stories in the news; and the 1939 initiation of Simon into Freemasonry at the Grand Orient Lodge of Paris which, by the end of the play, is revealed to be an extension of a sidewalk café. This ultimate turn to Freemasonry is

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<sup>1</sup> For the background story of *Le Trésor des Jésuites*, see Etienne-Alain Hubert's introductory notes to the play in André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes I-II*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet with Philippe Bernier, Etienne-Alain Hubert, and José Pierre (Paris: Gallimard, 1988-1992), 1:1743-1756. All references to this and other texts by Breton will subsequently be given parenthetically by volume and page number.

anticipated throughout the play by Breton and Aragon's numerous references to Masonic practice. For example, the number 33, achieved by the triple progression of 11 years and reappearing at the beginning of the play with the room numbers of the hotel (331, 332, 333), refers to the final degree of Masonic initiation, which Simon attains in the third tableau. In the initiation scene, Breton and Aragon also satirize the pompous nature of Masonic titles, mixing real names ("Souverain Grand Commandeur" and "Grand Capitaine des Gardes") with hyperbolic and extravagant parodies ("Le Très Sinistre Illustre Inconnu Autorité Suprême"). At the same time, the League of Nations is targeted as a conspiratorial operation, controlling world affairs from its corridors.

The final tableau, during which Simon is initiated as a Freemason, serves as a fitting burlesque climax to the oddities of the first two acts. He first overhears a conversation about Jesuits and Freemasons between fellow drinkers in a bar, in which World War II is presciently anticipated and France, the United States, and Czechoslovakia are declared to be under Masonic control. Moving on to the Grand Orient lodge, Simon there undergoes an initiation rite to attain the degree of "Sublime Prince de Royal Secret," during which he is asked to recount by other Masons how he had discovered the titular Treasure of the Jesuits. What follows is a long poem that mixes an adventure story (inspired by the popular stories of a contemporaneous explorer) with surrealist mythology: Uruguay, at once the location of the Treasure and the birthplace of Lautréamont, himself mentioned in the story; oblique references to the Paris Commune; and the image of "l'homme-cible," recalling a portrait of Apollinaire by Chirico (1:1010-1011). By the end of the initiation, Simon is revealed to be "Le Très Sinistre Illustre Inconnu Autorité Suprême," whose legend is announced in the play by references to occult texts important to surrealism, such as those of Corneille Agrippa and Nicolas Flamel. The Freemasons declare



Simon to be “Mario Sud, le Vieux de la Montagne,” but the stage directions reveal a final twist in the last moment: “*Éclair et tonnerre. La musique qui jouait en sourdine s’arrête. Mario Sud arrache son masque et ouvre sa cape. C’est Mad Sourî, en maillot rouge, parée de corail*” (1:1013). A chain of anagrams thus leads from the scene on stage to the mythology of surrealism: the long-awaited supreme Masonic authority Mario Sud is revealed to be the femme fatale Mad Sourî, played by the surrealist idol Musidora, who is assigned the last words of the play, delivered to the audience as the Freemasons intermingle on stage with bar patrons: “Avenir, avenir! Le monde devrait finir par une belle terrasse de café” (1:1014).

A burlesque comedy, *Le Trésor des Jésuites* is certainly one of the more minor works of surrealism’s literary history, but the play exemplifies the remarkable ease with which certain elements of surrealism mix with the mythology of the secret society. “Remarkable” in the particular case of Freemasonry since, as Jean-Pierre Lassalle notes in his article “André Breton et la Franc-maçonnerie,” Breton never belonged to the Freemasons, nor did he ever say anything directly for or against the organization.<sup>2</sup> But the facility with which the worlds of surrealism and the secret society interpenetrate is perhaps not that surprising. Surrealists often expressed their interest in and admiration of popular portrayals of underground, often criminal, organizations, such as those depicted in the prewar *Fantômas* novels and Feuillade’s *Vampires* films. Surrealism’s birth and heyday roughly coincide with the growth of popular magazines and journals dedicated to crime and the mysterious *fait divers* (e.g., *Détective*), which has led more than one critic to associate the avant-garde movement with a more widespread interest of interwar popular culture with the secrets of the underworld.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, much attention has been

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Lassalle, “André Breton et la Franc-maçonnerie,” *Histoires littéraires*, no. 1 (2000): 84.

<sup>3</sup> See Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Dudley Andrew and Steven Unger, *Popular Front Paris and the*

paid to André Breton's own personal interest in magic and the occult, particularly to the ways in which these disciplines might possibly serve as a philosophical underpinning for surrealism. For example, Anna Balakian, in her book *André Breton, Magus of Surrealism*, traces the early years of Breton's intellectual development under the heading "Medicine, Magic, and Mathematics," demonstrating the important role that reading the works of the heretic priest Eliphas Lévi had in revealing to Breton the concept of deeper realities and profound illuminations, an influence on par with his scientific discoveries and readings of Freud. She argues that "every one of his works was to bear some imprint of this hermeticism."<sup>4</sup> This critical reading on Breton's biographical interest in the occult extends even beyond the early years of surrealism, with Robert S. Short claiming that Breton's decision to join the leftwing group Contre-Attaque in the 1930s can essentially be traced to the ways in which the group resembled a secret society.<sup>5</sup>

This mixture of the occult and the conspiracy figures in at least one firsthand account of the early conversations that the future surrealists had about their project. In *Lautréamont et nous*, the work where he recounts the early influence of that poet on the surrealists, Aragon remembers how in 1919, while walking home and discussing their new journal *Littérature*, Breton and Aragon began to formulate what would eventually become surrealism:

J'explique le plan d'*Anicet* (j'en suis au chapitre 6) moins comme d'un roman que d'une conjuration. Cela prend naturellement le ton Fantômas, rien de littéraire, la critique de la poésie[...] B[reton]., donc, définit l'entreprise de destruction que nous allons

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*Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Jonathan P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Anna Balakian, *André Breton, Magus of Surrealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 35. See as well Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), in which the author argues that the esoteric and alchemic traditions are at the source of Breton's theory of another reality.

<sup>5</sup> Robert S. Short, "Contre-Attaque," in *Le Surréalisme: Entretiens de Cérisy-la-Salle*, ed. Ferdinand Alquié, (Paris and the Hague: Mouton, 1968), 153. He continues: "Breton avait été attiré par l'idée de la clandestinité et de l'hermétisme depuis la période dada."

entreprendre, avec qui voudra, mais entre nous un engagement secret, ne jamais en dire un mot à personne. La vie devant nous, courte probable, mais si nos compagnons lâchent, flanchent, sont pris du désir d'arriver, ou de s'asseoir, une femme, est-ce que je sais...alors, nous, sans faiblesse, celui qui renonce, le ruiner, le discréditer, tous les moyens seront bons. Il n'y a qu'une morale à ce niveau d'implacabilité: celle des bandits.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, this is Aragon's memory of a conversation which took place almost fifty years prior, and as such is almost certainly colored by the passage of time. But his recollection nevertheless places the secret society and the conspiracy at the origin of surrealism: what Breton is proposing is at once a vow to secrecy and a destructive plot, with the institution of art and all the literary forebears of surrealism (Gide, Valéry, and the *NRF* are mentioned in earlier pages) as their targets. In this sense, this early conception of surrealism can be seen as bearing the weight of both Lautréamont and Dada's influences: the critique of art by art itself, a conspiracy at the heart of the institution. What Breton adds to the artistic subversive plot is the notion of secrecy and the call to the moral strength of bandits: the plan must be secret, the group well-defined.

While this context provides a rich understanding of surrealism's inspiration, my focus in this chapter on the link between surrealism and the secret society is not so much one of a search for origins. Rather, it is to focus on the particular ways in which the idea of a secret society was invoked by Breton and others in some of surrealism's foundational texts as well as during the polemics that surrounded the group throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, instead of attempting to locate the originary myth of surrealism in Freemasonry or alchemist societies, I aim to analyze the role that the secret society model plays in defining the practice and value of the avant-garde for several of its central participants. As I am primarily interested here in the ways in which

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<sup>6</sup> Aragon, *Lautréamont et nous* (Toulouse: Sables, 1992), 77-78.

surrealism defined its practice, my focus will be on the movement's public or communal texts, such as the *Manifestos* and the various tracts and letters directed at surrealism, as opposed to "autobiographical" or narrative works like *Nadja*, *Les Vases communicants*, or *L'Amour fou*.<sup>7</sup> This is at once an imposed choice, since these are the primary texts where mentions of secret societies appear, but the choice is also not an arbitrary one, since the purpose of these texts is often to define a collective practice and purpose for surrealism. Moreover, it is precisely these works that often provoke debate over the place of the avant-garde in both literature and politics. As such, the choice of the secret society as a rhetorical tool or model for discussing the avant-garde proves telling.<sup>8</sup>

In these texts, secret societies function in two different but related ways: they help to set the terms of artistic and political practice for surrealism, and they define membership in the group. It should not be suggested, though, that surrealism adopted a stable definition of the secret society; these texts demonstrate the extent to which the meaning and value that Breton and others accord to secret societies shift throughout the interwar period. The first invocations of the secret society indicate a model of initiation and transformation, implying a surrealism ostensibly open to all, while the later model is based on exclusion and restriction, an avant-garde based on keeping out those deemed "impure" or "unworthy." This movement away from initiation and towards exclusion would seemingly contradict with the group's increasing political engagement during the interwar period; other avant-garde groups would attack surrealism on these political grounds, frequently employing the rhetoric of the secret society to discredit

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<sup>7</sup> In referring to these texts as "communal," I do not mean to imply that they are written communally (although that is sometimes the case). Rather, I mean to suggest that they attempt to define the group practice of surrealism, as opposed to the individual experiences of Aragon's solitary walker in *Le Paysan de Paris* or Breton's singular encounter with the disturbed young woman in *Nadja*.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that these are the only political texts in surrealism. Margaret Cohen has effectively shown the latent and not-so-latent Marxism of Breton's narrative works. See her *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

Breton's group. Tellingly, surrealism is criticized from both sides: on the one hand, members of the avant-garde declare that surrealism is not enough of a secret society because it cannot offer a true communal rite of revolution, and, on the other hand, different members accuse surrealism of being too much of a secret society because it only speaks to a small group of intellectuals, rather than to all of the masses. While targeting the group in opposite ways, these attacks essentially pose the same question of surrealism's problematic relationship with a theory and practice of revolution, thereby underlining the importance of the figure of the secret society in defining the political dimension of the avant-garde.

Moreover, the contradictory nature of these attacks stems in no small part from the tensions inherent to the secret society as a concept. It is precisely the ways in which the idea of a secret society embodies some of the major tensions inherent to the avant-garde, and surrealism in particular, that make it such an important figure for debating the intersection of literature and politics in the avant-garde. For the two notions contained in the term "secret society" – secrecy and collectivity – also entail their opposites: entering into such a community implies a revelation to the individual, a rite that the individual learns through initiation. Given the desire of Breton to arrive at a state where contradictions are no longer able to be perceived, this ability of the secret society to embody and maintain the contradictions of the secret and the manifest, as well as of the individual and community, make it a fundamental yet problematic model for surrealism.

### **Surrealist Initiation**

When the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* appeared in 1924, surrealist activity had already been brewing for several years. Breton and Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques*, often considered to be the first surrealist text, was written in 1919, and the definitive rupture with Dada, during which the surrealists declared their own existence through opposition to their

avant-garde forebears, had taken place at the end of 1921. The *Manifeste* did not, then, create a group out of thin air. That is not to suggest, however, that the text did not serve a foundational purpose. Breton's *Manifeste* performed all of the essential tasks of a founding document: it outlined a previous history, defined a practice for the present, and looked towards a far-off goal. As Martin Puchner argues in his study of manifestos, this is typical of the genre's unique relationship with time: in defining a group activity, the manifesto shapes the past by claiming antecedents and rejecting forebears while simultaneously proposing a future, the utopian ideal towards which its movement tends.<sup>9</sup> This is indeed the case with the *Premier manifeste du surréalisme*: Breton famously claims prior writers, from Swift and Sade to Poe and Rimbaud, as surrealist in some capacity, while also calling for the future resolution of the contradictory states of dream and reality into what he terms "surreality."

The gesture of the *Manifeste* towards the foundation of a literary avant-garde can be seen most clearly in the moments where Breton defines surrealism. For, rather than just describing a surrealist philosophy, Breton's definitional act insists on a conception of literature as a practice, rather than a history of texts or of authors: "L'homme propose et dispose. Il ne tient qu'à lui de s'appartenir tout entier, c'est-à-dire de maintenir à l'état anarchique la bande chaque jour plus redoutable de ses désirs. La poésie le lui enseigne... Qu'on se donne seulement la peine de *pratiquer* la poésie" (1:322, Breton's emphasis). The insistence on poetry as a practice reappears several pages later, when Breton first distinguishes the particular connotation he gives to his use of "surrealism" from those given to the term by Nerval or Apollinaire. It is the famous definition of surrealism in the *Premier manifeste*:

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

SURRÉALISME, n.m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale. (1:328)

As critics have often noted, Breton's initial definition of surrealism essentially equates it with automatism (the *Manifeste* itself was first intended as the preface to a work of automatic writing, *Poisson soluble*), and automatism is here defined as a verbal or written exploration of consciousness, liberated from the control of reason. But it is important to underline the fact that automatism is not conceived of as simply a theory; it is above all a technique, what Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron terms "un mode de production."<sup>10</sup> At this point in its definition, surrealism is essentially bound to an actual practice. A new form of practice (be it through automatic writing or by the evoked "other methods"), to be sure, but one that must be undertaken nonetheless, regardless of the philosophical aspirations and ideals of the movement, in order to attain the deeper and more hidden meanings of the world. As Marguerite Bonnet puts it, "il ne s'agit pas d'une connaissance pour la connaissance. Elle se soude à une *pratique*, qui produit le rejet des conditionnements contraignants et le refus d'une existence dominée par le malheur et le manqué."<sup>11</sup>

The secret society surfaces precisely at the moment in the text when Breton attempts an explanation of the practice of automatism. After listing how prior authors are surrealist in some capacity, Breton first insists that surrealists have no talent, that they are simply receptacles and recorders of interior echoes (1:330). He thus declares that surrealist practice need not be limited

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<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 68.

<sup>11</sup> Marguerite Bonnet, *André Breton, Naissance de l'aventure surréaliste* (Paris: José Corti, 1975), 347-348. Emphasis in the original.

to “high” literature or to “professional” authors; rather, it remains open to everyone, regardless of talent. What immediately follows this denial of talent is the description of the surrealist act, a directive to readers of how to perform automatic writing. Set off by a line of stars and a change in typeface, Breton presents the description under the heading “SECRETS DE L’ART MAGIQUE SURREALISTE”:

COMPOSITION SURREALISTE ÉCRITE, OU PREMIER ET DERNIER JET

Faites-vous apporter de quoi écrire, après vous être établi en un lieu aussi favorable que possible à la concentration de votre esprit sur lui-même. Placez-vous dans l’état le plus passif, ou réceptive, que vous pourrez. Faites abstraction de votre génie, de vos talents et de ceux de tous les artistes. Dites-vous bien que la littérature est un des plus tristes chemins qui mènent à tout. Écrivez vite sans sujet préconçu, assez vite pour ne pas retenir et ne pas être tenté de vous relire. (1:331-332)

Continuing on for practically an entire page, this description of the practice of automatic writing is certainly highly comic and parodic, mimicking as it does the commands of magic books describing the “secrets” of occult practices and magic.<sup>12</sup> It does, however, provide a directive for those wishing to practice surrealist writing, commanding the reader to perform certain acts according to the rites and rituals prescribed by surrealism. The passage repeats imperatives and directives for the initiate – take a pen, write quickly, don’t reread what you’ve written – that serve as an introduction into the techniques of automatic writing.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the biting humor present in *Le Trésor des Jésuites*, where the practices and rituals of Freemasonry are

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<sup>12</sup> As Marguerite Bonnet remarks in her notes to the text, “Est-il besoin de souligner que le titre et la structure de cet ensemble de ‘secrets’ sont calqués sur les livres populaires de magie, répandus notamment par les colporteurs?” (1:1358n3).

<sup>13</sup> As Margaret Cohen shows, Walter Benjamin subtly mocks this passage in his *One-Way Street*, describing the “Writer’s Technique in Thirteen Theses,” in which he poses “writing as a technique against the language of illumination and initiation that Breton employs.” See *Profane Illumination*, 178-179. For *One-Way Street*, see Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Dementz (New York: Schocken, 1986).



ruthlessly mocked, here serves a didactic purpose. Rather than a pure critique of the secret society, the humor has a function of inviting the reader to participate in the rites of the avant-garde group.

The *Manifeste* here plays a game between the hidden and the manifest, on the one hand describing its practices as “secret” (indeed, comparable to magic) and on the other revealing these very practices. As Martin Puchner has shown, this interplay is one inherent to the manifesto as a text, stemming in part from the importance of practices of religious revelation in the prehistory of the genre, practices where the word of God is brought into the world. Puchner argues that this tension between what he terms the “latent” and the “manifest” is one especially important to surrealism, since one of the central ideas of the movement is to bring out what is hidden in the unconscious, in dreams, and in thought. Automatic writing itself is meant to be a practice of revelation of the unconscious, a recording what has been previously obscured.<sup>14</sup> In these passages giving surrealist directives, the *Manifeste* attempts to put into practice this interplay between the hidden and the revealed, bringing out into the open the techniques at the heart of surrealism. What is interesting is that the invocation of “magic” seems a not-so-subtle gesture towards both playing with and overcoming this tension: through the invocation of the *occult*, Breton wants to *reveal*, outlining the practice of the avant-garde.

Breton continues to offer several more directives in the “Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art” passage, offering commands under the headings “POUR NE PAS S’ENNUIYER EN COMPAGNIE,” “POUR FAIRE DES DISCOURS,” “POUR ÉCRIRE DE FAUX ROMANS,”

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<sup>14</sup> On the religious prehistory of the manifesto, see *Poetry of the Revolution*, 12-13. On the play between the latent and the manifest in surrealism, see pages 190-191. Puchner argues that automatic writing as a practice is itself caught in the contradiction between the latent and the manifest because, as a type of expression, it still demands interpretation and decoding. In other words, it calls for another level of revelation through interpretation. On this play between revealing and concealing within various surrealist literary texts, see the essays collected in *Le Manifeste et le caché: Langages surréalistes et autres*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1974).

and “POUR SE FAIRE VOIR D’UNE FEMME QUI PASSE DANS LA RUE,” each one instructing the reader on surrealist practices to fulfill the stated objective.<sup>15</sup> The final part of the “Secrets” section is not so much a directive as it is a prediction: “CONTRE LA MORT. Le surréalisme vous introduira dans la mort qui est une société secrète. Il gantera votre main, y ensevelissant l’M profond par quoi commence le mot Mémoire. ” (1:334) The only directive in this passage is to make “d’heureuses dispositions testamentaires,” but the sections indicate that the culmination of surrealist practice is a sort of initiation. Yet what Breton implies in this passage is not so much that surrealism as a group is itself a secret society, but rather that surrealism *as a practice* is the rite by which one enters into another experience. In other words, the rituals of surrealism open the door to a transformative reality, conceived of as a “secret society.” While the section bears the title “contre la mort,” the passage, in a typical surrealist turn of antinomy, suggests that death is, in fact, a state to be acceded to: rather than the end of life, it is a transcendent experience, a reality beyond the one at hand.<sup>16</sup> This passage demonstrates how the rhetorical recourse to the secret society has a primarily *metaphorical* function: “la mort qui est une société secrète.” Breton places the emphasis on the practice of surrealism as a means to attaining that other existence, revealing the terms and conditions behind the “secret society” of death.

While the references to secret societies and rituals remain few, they nevertheless are placed at a crucial moment in the *Manifeste*, helping to articulate Breton’s project in the text. Breton certainly insists on surrealism as a group; one of the primary functions of the manifesto as

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<sup>15</sup> The last category, “Pour se faire voir d’une femme,” is the exception: Breton only gives five lines of ellipses.

<sup>16</sup> In her gloss on this passage, Marguerite Bonnet suggests that “l’art magique surréaliste métamorphosera radicalement la condition humaine, car transcendant la personne, il assurera la maîtrise du temps.” See her *André Breton*, 356.

a genre is to define who ought to belong to a group and according to what conditions.<sup>17</sup> But what primarily emerges from their invocation is the idea that surrealism is open to all, that artistic talent counts for little. Rather than an exclusionary model, surrealism offers itself as an initiation within reach of anyone who practices automatism. In this *Premier manifeste*, the limits of surrealism are essentially set according to practice, rather than politics or ideology: those who call themselves “surrealists” are those who practice automatism. In this sense, the emphasis is here placed on the individual who practices, who is then able to access a larger community. This is exemplified by Breton in the *Premier manifeste* when he writes of surrealist poetics that “chacun poursuit simplement son soliloque, sans chercher à en tirer un plaisir dialectique et à en imposer le moins du monde à son voisin” (1:336). In other words, the surrealist act is an individual ritual, a soliloquy that each member recites.<sup>18</sup> This passage of the individual into a community is what is implied by the “CONTRE LA MORT” directive, and it helps to explain the attraction of the secret society as a metaphorical model: it entails both the rite of the individual and the virtual community, with both terms essential to the process. At this point with the *Premier manifeste*, participation in surrealism is defined by the individual practices of its members, and the secret society model allows for that articulation: automatism initiates its practitioners into a larger collective.

### Surrealist Exclusion

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<sup>17</sup> See Janet Lyon’s *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. chapter 1, and Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution*.

<sup>18</sup> Therein lies the tension, for as Vincent Kaufman notes, it is in the absence of exchange, the moment when “je” and “tu” dissolve, that surrealism arrives at a “mise en commun” of thought. Or, in Kaufmann’s words, “là où plus personne ne se parle, on parle enfin ensemble.” Vincent Kaufmann, *Poétique des groupes littéraires (Avant-gardes 1920-1970)*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 30-31. Kaufmann continues: “l’automatisme fait miroiter un communisme de l’écriture, une totalité (la poésie faite par tous), mais la communauté reste virtuelle parce qu’elle est passée par le sacrifice de toutes les subjectivités, de tous les ‘je’ ” (31).

If the first stage of surrealist activity was centered around the theory and practice of automatic writing, its evolution throughout the rest of the 1920s and 1930s can be characterized by the increasing politicization of the movement. Beginning with the public opposition of its members to the 1925 war in Morocco and continuing through Pierre Naville's influential critique of the surrealist pursuit of metaphysics at the expense of revolution, the years following the first *Manifeste* were a period of intense political positioning and posturing.<sup>19</sup> As they became gradually convinced that the surrealist goal of transforming reality could only be achieved through a complete revolution of the social order, several members of the surrealist group applied to join the Parti communiste français, only to be deferred or rejected. This period of politicization also coincides with some of the first expulsions from the group: in the 1927 collection of texts *Au grand jour*, Breton explains the relationship between surrealism and communism, underlining that Philippe Soupault and Antonin Artaud had been thrown out of the group because of their lack of rigor and dedication to the revolutionary cause. Explaining the need to cut ranks, Breton declares that the time has come to “conditionner l'action surréaliste” by the assignment of “limites exactes” to this action (1:929). Breton's texts in the latter part of the decade were increasingly designed to define surrealism by determining categories and conditions for membership.<sup>20</sup> These texts, from questionnaires about the prospects of group artistic activity (1929's *A suivre*) to polemics with other member of the avant-garde, bear witness to the growing schism within surrealism concerning literature and collective action.

These divisive concerns would lead to the second *Manifeste du surréalisme*, initially published in 1930. In this text, Breton attempts to explain how surrealism remains compatible

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<sup>19</sup> See Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), 86-102.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Puchner draws comparisons between Breton's use of the manifesto as an instrument for group discipline with Stalin's purges of the Communist Party. As seen above, this is perhaps less true of the first *Manifeste*, but is certainly valid for other tracts of the period. See *Poetry of the Revolution*, 186.

with and even necessary for a theory of revolution, in the process shifting the focus from the practice of automatism to a more general revolt against the current state of reality, as defined by the constraints of bourgeois society. Within the first two paragraphs, he defines the goal of surrealist activity as the determination of “un certain point de l’esprit d’où la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le future, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement” (1:781). To achieve this goal of overcoming contradictions of reality, Breton poses that surrealist practices ought no longer be limited to those of the artistic field. At one point he equates surrealism with action and violence, citing its adherence to “un dogme de la révolte absolue” and famously declaring that “l’acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu’on peut, dans la foule” (1:782-783). While the literary or artistic nature of surrealism certainly still exists – Breton states that surrealism has not gone far enough in exploring the realms of possibility suggested by automatic writing, dreams, and hypnotism – the focus has nonetheless shifted towards collective action and revolt at the expense of individual practice. One of Breton’s goals in the *Second manifeste* is to insist that surrealism is not, as he terms it, “un passe-temps intellectuel comme un autre” like Artaud and others claimed (1:788). Rather, through a mixture of Hegel, Marx, and Freud, surrealism is seen as a totalizing experience, at once “politique, artistique, polémique” (1:792).

However, the insistence on collective action at the expense of individual practice means that Breton must define the new terms of this collectivity. For that, towards the end of the *Second manifeste* he returns to the *Premier manifeste*’s theme of occult knowledge, spending several pages and one long footnote describing how surrealism’s goals are analogous to those of alchemists, mages, and mystics. Demonstrating the double influence of Rimbaud’s “Alchimie

du verbe” and “Lettre au voyant,” Breton establishes an equivalence between hermetic knowledge and surrealist practice in pursuit of the “long, immense, raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens” (1:819). As it is peppered throughout with references to esoteric books by occult philosophers Corneille Agrippa and Nicolas Flamel, this section of the *Second manifeste* has often been cited as the enduring influence of magic on Breton’s thinking. Critics have also read these passages as a shift from literary practice to a metaphorical exploration of consciousness: the “préparatifs artistiques” of surrealism’s early stage must give way to a transformative consideration of subjectivity, where the limits between subject and object are overcome, transforming them both through an alchemy of consciousness.<sup>21</sup> While that reading is certainly valid and important to an understanding of the shifting focus of the *Second manifeste*, it still neglects the ways in which Breton underlines in this passage a clear opposition between the initiated and the uninitiated, between the “secrets” of the avant-garde and the “manifest” of the public. In other words, beyond philosophical exploration, there is a practical movement of definition at work here, an attempt to set the terms for membership in surrealism.

Breton’s first tactic is to establish between surrealism and the occult a tradition of exclusion and premonition. Recalling Lautréamont’s warning to his reader that *Les Chants de Maldoror* could serve as a curse, Breton declares: “Le surréalisme a tout à perdre à vouloir éloigner de lui-même cette malédiction. Il importe de réitérer et de maintenir ici le ‘Marantha’ des alchimistes, placé au seuil de l’œuvre pour arrêter les profanes” (1:821). The “Marantha,” given by the medieval alchemist Nicolas Flamel as a cautionary curse to impede unknowing readers from gaining secret knowledge, is invoked by Breton to keep out surrealism’s uninitiated. Breton insists on this fact by critiquing those surrealists who have become too preoccupied with artistic success and acclaim: “C’est même là ce qu’il me paraît le plus urgent

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Balakian, 98-99, and Bonnet’s notes to this section of the *Second manifeste*.

de faire comprendre à quelques-uns de nos amis qui me paraissent un peu trop préoccupés de la vente et du placement de leurs tableaux.” Rather than being appropriated by bourgeois society, turned into a simple phenomenon of artistic success, surrealists must instead turn inwards, towards the group. The uninitiated, the “profane” who must be stopped “au seuil de l’œuvre,” is essentially the general public, whose approval is entirely unnecessary to surrealist activity: “L’approbation du public est à fuir par-dessus tout. Il faut absolument empêcher le public d’*entrer* si l’on veut éviter la confusion. J’ajoute qu’il faut le tenir exaspéré à la porte par un système de défis et de provocations” (1:821, Breton’s emphasis). In other words, the redefinition of surrealism ought to take place in terms of a split with the “public.” As opposed to the *Premier manifeste*’s insistence that surrealist activity was open to all, provided that one follow the practice of automatic writing, the *Second manifeste* uses the model of the secret society as an exclusionary tool, defining surrealism as a group *against* the public and bourgeois success. The multiple exclusionary images – the “seuil de l’oeuvre,” the public exasperated at the door – reinforces the notion that Breton is offering a reconfiguration of the avant-garde, a movement away from literary technique and practice toward a group identified by its separation from the general public. The model has thus shifted from one of initiation to one of exclusion.

The next sentence, set off and in capital letters by Breton, demonstrates this new positioning: “JE DEMANDE L’OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VÉRITABLE DU SURRÉALISME” (1:821). While Marguerite Bonnet claims that Breton’s use of the word “occultation” here is mainly in a poetic sense, not actually representing an actual adherence on his part to any particular esoteric tradition, its immediate context in Breton’s attempts to exclude members from his group places it in a more literal framework: surrealism is to be “occulted” in order to keep the society closed off from the uninitiated. This movement towards obscurity and

secrecy is amplified by the footnote that follows, added in the second edition of the *Second manifeste* as a response to critiques of Breton's use of the word "occultation." The content of the note, which runs five paragraphs and over the course of three pages, covers everything from astrology and surrealist games to love and madness, in the process citing at length from other texts. In it, Breton defines the collective practices of surrealism as an attempt at discovering the "mise en commun" of consciousness, and insists that the pursuit of these and other discoveries should take place "excluant, bien entendu, au-dehors toute poétisation" (1:822). What is interesting about the passage is that, rather than clarifying his use of the word "occultation," the footnote has the function of obscuring its very meaning by creating a twisting detour from Breton's argument. In other words, it occults. This is a distinguishing characteristic of Breton's *Manifestes*: as noted by Martin Puchner, footnotes such as these, "rendering surrealist manifestos downright academic, signal Breton's desire to create different layers of texts, registers of discourse, and modes of argument."<sup>22</sup> Rather than the didactic yet humoristic invocation of rites of initiation that the reader is invited (commanded, even) to perform in the *Premier manifeste*, the purpose of this passage in the *Second manifeste* is to close off the uninitiated reader "au seuil de l'œuvre." The comprehension of the footnote entails an understanding of astrology, surrealist practice, and Breton's theory of love. Thus, the constant play between the secret and the manifest works here in favor of the first term: the "explanatory" note essentially masks and obscures, creating in essence another textual community. If in the *Premier manifeste*, Breton invoked the occult in order to reveal, here the opposite is true: he reveals in order to occult.

This shift in the emphasis of the secret society towards a community based on occultation and exclusion can be traced in part to the desire of Breton to maintain control over his group.

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<sup>22</sup> Puchner, 191. Puchner also cites Breton's own characterization of the style of the first *Manifeste* as "serpentine, distracting."



Faced with criticisms from within and the difficulties surrealism faced in courting the Communist Party, Breton's move is thus to establish a society containing only the "pure," while the uninitiated – meaning now those who question Breton – are kept at bay. As with the general public, he also continues to cite the need for limits for excluding from within. Invoking what he terms an "absolute severity" in his approach, Breton insists that surrealism's movement towards secrecy must come without conceding territory to its opponents: "Pas de concessions au monde et pas de grâce" (1:822). Going on to discuss how books of magic always advocate that one be pure before invoking the occult arts, Breton then excoriates Georges Bataille for (among many other trespasses) being too interested in the vile and the corrupt. Breton's move has a double purpose: the invocation of the need for purity in magic allows him to expel Bataille for not sharing the belief in this need, but it also speaks to the need for surrealism to itself remain "pure." What Breton implies is that surrealism can only achieve its goal through a cleansing purge of its members. The *Second manifeste* assumes a definition of surrealism which recalls a secret society both in its knowledge – the "occult" arts of surrealist practice and philosophy – and in its determinations of membership.

Breton's rhetorical use of the secret society has thus shifted between the *Premier manifeste* and the *Second*: whereas it had an essentially metaphorical function in the earlier text, the model becomes the practice in the later text. Rather than just standing in for a higher state of existence that surrealism initiates its practitioners into ("la mort qui est une société secrète"), Breton actually moves to close off his group through practices both textual (such as his use of footnotes) and extratextual (such as his exclusion of other members). The change in tone from one *Manifeste* to the other also bears witness to this shift: the inviting humor of the "arts magiques" of the *Premier manifeste* has become a serious exposition of surrealist philosophy and

a severe excoriation of its dissidents. In other words, Breton attempts to move the secret society from the realm of metaphor into the realm of practice, in the process shifting the emphasis from a model of initiation to one of exclusion.

### **The Conspiracy of the Avant-Garde**

It should not be thought that this excluding gesture of the general public from the group is particular to surrealism. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Renato Poggioli argues that this separation from the public is one of the hallmarks of criticisms of the avant-garde: the obscurity and difficulty of the avant-garde text entails an opposition between an elite public and a mass public.<sup>23</sup> Poggioli employs a similar rhetoric to Breton's when he describes the process of entering into the elite public of the avant-garde as an "initiation." While countering the idea that the avant-garde ought to entail a series of deeper and deeper initiations, Poggioli does agree that one has to undergo a "primary, fundamental, and absolute initiation" into the "general principle" of the avant-garde.<sup>24</sup> For Poggioli, this primary initiation is accepting the idea of goals and aims of avant-garde art, including its difficulty. This helps to underscore why the model of the secret society remained so important to the articulation of the surrealist movement: if the avant-garde demands both an exclusion (in that it cannot be appreciated by all and remain "avant-garde") and an initiation (in that it requires its public to accept the group on its own terms), its very idea approaches that of the secret society.

Yet in discussing this trend of difficulty and obscurity in the avant-garde, Poggioli cites other models, namely the "cenacles" and "chappelles" of the symbolist and decadent movements

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<sup>23</sup> Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 150.

<sup>24</sup> *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 152.

of the late nineteenth-century.<sup>25</sup> What then would be the difference between the model of the secret society and these other figures of literary groups? Why do Breton and others insist on the image of the secret society as opposed to the cenacle, the salon, or the chapelle? Part of the answer is tied, of course, to the idea of innovation: it would seem to run contrary to the avant-garde's project to adopt a used mantle, and since most avant-garde movements are founded by rejecting their artistic forebears, this would also extend to the models of their predecessors. But the other, more important part of the answer lies in the ways in which the secret society is implicated in a notion of politics. As opposed to the ivory tower image of the chapelle or the exclusively literary salon of the cenacle, the secret society is a political mythology, linked to the mechanisms of power and their manipulation.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the political meaning of the avant-garde has its own history, stretching back at least to the nineteenth century when Saint-Simon famously invoked the role of artists in social movements by referring to them as serving as the "avant-garde" to industrialists and scientists. Saint-Simon's use of "avant-garde" lacks the notion of aesthetic extremism that the term assumes in twentieth-century modernism, signifying more a concept of a vanguard or forefront to the idea of social change. The Saint-Simonian artist recalls almost a socialist realist artist propagating to the masses a program of reform. From the question of practice, the history of Saint-Simoniansim as a *political* avant-garde resembles in many ways a secret society: several of its members were involved in revolutionary conspiracies, and the movement was persecuted by the state for contravening public order.<sup>27</sup> But as Matei

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<sup>25</sup> "We must finally note that even within avant-garde art proper, obscurity is more intensely exploited by those circles or special groups called cenacles or sects, particularly in certain *chapelles* of decadence and symbolism." *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 154.

<sup>26</sup> On the political mythology of the secret society and conspiracy, see Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Saint-Simon's use of "avant-garde" appears in an 1820 dialogue historically attributed to his disciple Olindes Rodrigues, "L'artiste, le savant, et l'industriel," in *Oeuvres de Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon*, vol. 5 (Paris: Editions

Calinescu among others notes, throughout the nineteenth century the use of the metaphor of the “avant-garde” came to mean more and more radicalism in both politics and art, assuming a cultural sense that implies the double process of changing society and changing art.<sup>28</sup> The political history of the avant-garde makes it easier to understand how it would seek out other political models, notably that of the secret society.

This conjunction between politics and the avant-garde was noted by one of surrealism’s celebrated interpreters, Walter Benjamin, who wrote about surrealism in 1928, even before the political provocations of the *Deuxième manifeste*: “There is always, in such movements, a moment when the original tension of the secret society must either explode in a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public demonstration and be transformed. Surrealism is in this phase of transformation now.”<sup>29</sup> Benjamin’s argument is that an avant-garde group, like a secret society, must either become a truly transformative and revolutionary politics or just remain at the level of mere revolt. The importance, then, of the secret society as a model for defining the avant-garde is that, along with the ideas of exclusion and initiation that I have already discussed, it entails a political practice for the group. The secret society frequently figures in debates on surrealism *within* the avant-garde itself, and precisely along these lines of politics and collective action. The intergroup opposition is perhaps exemplified most interestingly by the split between the surrealists and the *Grand Jeu*, the group

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Anthropos, 1966), 199-258. On the history of Saint-Simonianism and art, see Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of Happiness: Social Art and the French Left, 1830-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987). Renato Poggioli also traces a similar history in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcutt; ed. and introd. by Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 178.

formed in 1928 on the margins of surrealism by Robert Gilbert-Lecomte, René Daumal, Roger Vailland, and Joseph Sima.

On first glance, the *Grand Jeu* shares a wide range of interest with Breton's surrealism.<sup>30</sup> The initial declaration of the review, appearing in 1928, expresses at once a critique of the institutions of art, politics, and religion ("Il [le *Grand Jeu*] est donc l'ennemi naturel des Patries, des Etats impérialistes, des classes régnantes, des Religions, des Sorbonnes, des Académies") and an attraction for various examples of esotericism ("les Rishis védiques, les Rabbis cabalistes, les prophètes, les mystiques, les grands hérétiques de tous les temps, et les Poètes, les vrais").<sup>31</sup> Even their chosen name plays on this, as the "Grand Jeu" can mean both Tarot and a complete effort. This double desire to upend society and pursue arcane knowledge would later be accompanied by a reclamation of surrealism's literary forebears, Rimbaud and Lautréamont in particular. Again and again in their texts, the members of the *Grand Jeu* continuously stressed the possibility and power of revolution, praising the destructive power of what they termed in their first issue "la nécessité de la révolte." Or, as they declared in their first announcement: "Il s'agit avant tout de faire désespérer les hommes d'eux-mêmes et de la société. De ce massacre d'espoirs naîtra une Espérance sanglante et sans pitié: être éternel par refus de vouloir durer. Nos découvertes sont celles de l'éclatement et de la dissolution de tout ce qui est organisé."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, as with surrealism, the mythology of the secret society is attached to the origins of the *Grand Jeu*. Originally formed as the group "Phrères Simplistes" in a *lycée* by a group of students in *première*, their self-invented rites and secret codes had the effect of keeping their friends in *seconde* at the edges of their group, as if it were a "sorte de société secrète... fermée," according to one participant, Jean Duflot. As quoted in Viviane Couillard, "Le *Grand Jeu*: Groupe, ruptures," in *Des années trentes: Groupes et ruptures*, ed. Anne Roche and Christian Tarting (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1985), 238.

<sup>31</sup> René Daumal, "Projet de présentation du *Grand Jeu*," in *Le Grand Jeu*, ed. Marc Thivolet (Paris: Edition de l'Herne, 1968), 17.

<sup>32</sup> "Le circulaire du *Grand Jeu*," in *Le Grand Jeu*, 18.

The *Grand Jeu* thus conceived of its project around the dialectic of union and disintegration, a group that itself calls for the dismantling of all groups.

This melding of total revolt and mystical revelation was formulated within the context of a group experience, one that pushed the concept of communal experience to the limit. As formulated by Robert Gilbert-Lecomte, the *Grand Jeu* experience is one of the disappearance of the individual into the community: “Aussi bien nous ne sommes pas individualistes: au lieu de nous enfermer dans notre passé, nous marchons unis tous ensemble, chacun emportant son propre cadavre sur son dos. Car nous, nous ne formons pas un groupe littéraire, mais une union d’hommes liés à la même recherche.”<sup>33</sup> This dissolution of the individual into the group is a recurrent theme of the *Grand Jeu*, and one that would invite conflict with the surrealists. In 1928, when the members of the *Grand Jeu* received a questionnaire asking them about the possibility of collaborative collective action with the surrealists, they refused to respond individually: “Etant donné notre attitude anti-individualiste, tant dans le domaine de la pensée que dans celui de l’action, il ne peut être question pour nous, sur quelque plan que ce soit, d’activité efficace autre que collective” (1:967). Their collective response insists on their fundamental agreement with surrealist goals but nevertheless distances the *Grand Jeu* from the techniques of surrealist group and their endless internal debates. In other words, they critique the *reality* of surrealist practice as being too individual, and not collective enough.<sup>34</sup> It was thus in an attempt at reconciling the two groups that Breton would address René Daumal in the *Second*

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Gilbert-Lecomte, “Avant-propos au premier numéro du *Grand Jeu*,” in *Le Grand Jeu*, 39. As if to demonstrate the communal spirit of the group, this declaration is signed “en complet accord” by the various members of the *Grand Jeu*.

<sup>34</sup> This choice of response was met with hostility by the surrealists, as were the *Grand Jeu*’s use of the word “Dieu” and their avowed preference for the serial killer Landru over the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. See Nadeau’s *Histoire du surréalisme*, 122-134. For her part, Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron argues that the resulting schism between the surrealists and the *Grand Jeu* troubled Breton since it effectively isolated him from some of the more younger and more powerful personalities of the avant-garde. See her *Surréalisme*, 64-65.

*manifeste*. After looking around for someone with whom to exchange “un signe d’intelligence,” Breton appeals to Daumal’s appreciation of Lautréamont and Rimbaud, shared by the surrealists, and asks: “Pour quelles fins mesquines opposer, dès lors, un groupe à un groupe?” (1:818).

Daumal’s response, the “Lettre ouverte à André Breton sur les rapports du surréalisme et du *Grand Jeu*,” printed in 1929 in the third and final issue of *Le Grand Jeu*,<sup>35</sup> turns Breton’s rhetoric of the secret society in the *Second manifeste* against surrealism to offer a different theory of the avant-garde. The letter is remarkable in that it testifies to Daumal’s appreciation and esteem of Breton, ultimately declared to be “un des rares hommes qui vont sans trahir, dans la seule voie où nous nous permettions d’aller” (195), and of the general correspondence between the two groups’ goals. However, Daumal begins the letter against surrealism by immediately asserting a distinguishing factor between his group and Breton’s: “*Le Grand Jeu* est une communauté en quelque sorte initiatique; chacun de ses membres, quoi qu’il fasse, le fait avec la volonté de maintenir et renforcer l’unité spirituelle du groupe” (191, my emphasis). Daumal adopts the model of the secret society to turn it against Breton: rather than the lines of fissure running through surrealism, the *Grand Jeu*’s initiatory community maintains a spiritual unity. As such, the *Grand Jeu* is “à cent lieues” from surrealism (191). What develops throughout the letter is Daumal’s sense that, in spite of the large terrain shared by surrealism and the *Grand Jeu*, it is the latter that truly represents a transformational revolutionary group.

Daumal’s critique of surrealism adopts two essential positions: that surrealism only offers poor and meaningless rites of initiation, and that surrealism fails to create a true sense of

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<sup>35</sup> René Daumal, “Lettre ouverte à André Breton sur les rapports entre le surréalisme et le *Grand Jeu*,” in Thivolet, 191-195. Citations will be given parenthetically.

community necessary for revolution.<sup>36</sup> On the first count, Daumal insists that surrealist practices have been rendered nothing but useless “poncifs”: “Si bien qu’aujourd’hui j’irais vers vous pour me livrer à vos petits jeux de société, à ces dérisoires et piétinantes recherches vers ce que vous nommez improprement le ‘surréal’?” (193). Repeating a common criticism of surrealism, Daumal asserts that the same surrealist practices that Breton gave as his group’s “secret arts” – le cadavre exquis, automatic writing, hypnotic games – are nothing but parlor games for the bourgeoisie, and as such, they are incapable of offering the true transformational experience of revolutionary action. In another essay on the relationship between surrealism and the *Grand Jeu* contemporaneous with the open letter, Daumal would return to this problem of audience in outlining a major challenge for the groups: “Trouver les moyens de se faire entendre, non plus du public bourgeois snob et dilettante, mais des véritables penseurs révolutionnaires.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, surrealism’s main effect is on the dominant class, rather than on the revolutionary milieu, and it is largely a problem of communication and strategy. Against what he terms surrealism’s “science amusante,” Daumal offers the rites of the *Grand Jeu*, including (among others) the “champ illimité...des yogas hindous” and “les enseignements de la tradition occulte” (193). Daumal seems to critique Breton’s reclamation of the latter by proclaiming “mais *au diable* le *pittoresque* de la magie.” In other words, the true experience of the occult will not come from the invented practices of surrealism, but from a profound, internal study and application of esoteric traditions.<sup>38</sup> What is required is a transformational politics, and the true avant-garde

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<sup>36</sup> This is similar to Benjamin’s notion of the need for the avant-garde to become a true revolutionary force, rather than a “profane” struggle for power.

<sup>37</sup> “Le surréalisme et le *Grand Jeu*,” in *L’Evidence absurde. Essais et notes I*, ed. Claudio Rugafori (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 160.

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, while not specifically addressing surrealism, several other articles in this same issue of *Le Grand Jeu*, grouped under the rubric “L’univers des mythes,” nonetheless touch on the importance for diverse occult rites in the *Grand Jeu* universe.



should thus involve real revolutionary thinkers, rather than just an elite class from the bourgeoisie.

As a second criticism of surrealism, Daumal accuses surrealism of failing on what he calls an “ideological” level: the revolution can only come about through a *group* illumination. Referencing Jean Pic de la Mirandole, the fifteenth-century Italian scholar credited for creating “Christian Kabbalism,” Daumal returns to the idea of communal action: “Or, le temps des Pic de la Mirandole n’est plus. Il fallait donc que l’Esprit s’emparât non d’un homme, mais d’un groupe. Cela, vous l’avez bien senti avec la nécessité d’une étroite collaboration et d’une cohésion parfait. Mais jamais le groupe surréaliste n’a été ce groupe, et c’est ce qui le condamne” (193). Daumal’s concept of occult illumination remains tied to a group, but a group that demonstrates spiritual unity, rather than the divisions that have riven the surrealists. The thrust of Daumal’s argument is that the rites of surrealism are essentially tied to the individual, rather than the group.<sup>39</sup> He returns to the poetic domain by demonstrating that Baudelaire’s theory of *correspondances* must be taken up and reborn as “une systématique de la pensée mystique et de l’esprit de participation” (193). Surrealism has thus failed on a multiple level: it has offered pale substitutions for true rites of initiation, it cannot maintain its collective unity for the sake of revolution, and it fails to apprehend its own literary traditions.

Daumal’s critique of surrealism via the secret society allows for a better understanding of the precise value of this model in debates over the avant-garde. The essential argument against surrealism here is that it is not revolutionary enough, that it cannot offer a true rite of *group* transformation. In other words, from the point of view of Daumal, surrealism is, in essence, not *enough* of a secret society. Daumal’s insistence on the collective rites of the *Grand Jeu*

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<sup>39</sup> The break between Daumal’s group and surrealism occurred because the *Grand Jeu* refused to respond individually to a questionnaire inquiring about the possibility of collective action.

establishes a vision of the avant-garde that is not based on individual literary practice but on transformational experiences by and with a group. Thus, the criticism of surrealism underlines the important political dimension of the secret society, but also demonstrates how the debate over politics in the avant-garde remains focused on collective, rather than individual, action.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the focus on revolt serves to critique the surrealist attempts at revolutionary activity: as it remains incapable of speaking to true revolutionary movements, surrealism cannot offer a true theory of revolt. It is, in other words, a false secret society, one that seems to offer up the promise of powerful experience but cannot deliver.

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Beyond the rather polite yet substantial disagreement between Breton and Daumal, the *Second manifeste* also sparked one of the most incendiary reactions in the history of surrealism, the joint anti-Breton pamphlet *Un cadavre*. Recycling the title of a similar tract, published in 1924 on the occasion of Anatole France's death, this pamphlet, with contributions from Michel Leiris, Raymond Queneau, Georges Bataille, and others, was aimed at burying Breton while he was alive. The tone of its various contributions is caustic and hyperbolic, demonstrating the increasing hostility that Breton was inviting from a whole host of former surrealists. Interestingly, it is Breton's use of the word "occultation" in the *Second manifeste* that seems to inspire some of the more memorable passages in *Un cadavre*.<sup>41</sup> As evidenced by Roger Vitrac's vitriolic attack in "Moralement, puer...", this proved to be great fodder for Breton's critics:

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<sup>40</sup> Yet the *Grand Jeu*'s insistence on revolutionary politics did not translate into adherence to any political party or organized political participation. In fact, as Viviane Couillard notes, the group's intentions were more of a revolt of ideas, rather than "real" engagement, and for this they remain unique among 1930s groups. See her article "*Le Grand Jeu*: Groupe, ruptures," 244-245. It should be noted that this balking over political parties serves to underline further the political edge of the avant-garde and the secret society: the revolutionary group must remain well-defined and separate.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it was in response to these attacks that led Breton to add the footnote in the second edition of the *Second manifeste*.

Que deviendra donc dès 1930 cette *école nouvelle en fait de science*? Ce surréalisme, qui l'OCCULTERA?

Et qu'est devenu aujourd'hui *cet investigateur de premier ordre*? Hélas! une larve menacée par le feu et la pointe des épées, une ombre lamentable que compisse chaque jour Astaroth et que sodomise perpétuellement Rosamasa! Encore le glaviot retombant sur le nez! Encore un coup de boomerang magique! Et passez-moi la truelle du franc-maçon que je lui rebouche le chancre.<sup>42</sup>

The references to demons, the magic boomerang, the Masonic trowel: clearly Breton's use of the occult was too much of an invitation not to be turned against him. But beyond the derisive hyperbole of Vitrac, the critiques of *Un cadavre* still present a fundamental critique of surrealism that draws on the model of the secret society.

On the one hand, Breton's critics focus on his invocation of the occult in order to associate surrealism with religion and mysticism. This line of attack is evident from the cover of *Un cadavre*, which features a photograph of Breton wearing a crown of thorns, an allusion to the fact that he had turned 33 in 1930, the same age as Jesus at his death. In his withering attack, "Le lion châtré," Bataille makes the parallel explicit, calling Breton a "faux révolutionnaire à tête de Christ," and declaring surrealism to be a "new religion".<sup>43</sup> For Bataille, the invocation of the occult serves as an essential characteristic of the religiosity of the avant-garde group: "Personne ne doute en effet que les conditions élémentaires du succès religieux ne soient réunies par la religion surréaliste, le 'mystère' touchant les dogmes allant aujourd'hui jusqu'à l'*occultation*" (146, Bataille's emphasis). Bataille asserts that the true occultation of Breton's text is the

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<sup>42</sup> Roger Vitrac, "Moralement, puer...", in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives I*, ed. José Pierre (Paris: Le Terrain vague, 1980), 137. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>43</sup> Georges Bataille, "Le Lion châtré," in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives I*, 146. Citations given parenthetically.

attempt at covering up his religious tendencies, a move towards dissimulating surrealism's "entreprise révolutionnaire sous une pauvre phraséologie révolutionnaire" (146). Religious pursuit is, for Bataille, a misguided search for liberty, a transposition of the desire for liberty into the mythical realm. His central criticism of surrealism – that it tends towards idealism, rather than a materialist engagement with the critical problems of society – finds new justification in Breton's turn towards mysticism. Rather than a true revolutionary pursuit, a real critique of the systems of oppression and repression in modern society, surrealism represents a hypocritical religiosity cloaked in a false rhetoric of liberation.<sup>44</sup>

Bataille's critique of Breton's politics represents a common line of attack against surrealism in *Un cadavre*. In his contribution of an open letter, Georges Limbour writes a short history of Breton's political life, arguing that he has always been "un quelconque anarchiste sentimental" who was drawn to communism mainly for the fact that its system of organization creates a remove from real engagement.<sup>45</sup> Rather than the violent commitment of anarchy, communism offers "la ressource des discours dans les cellules, des intrigues, des rivalités" (140), and Breton's tendency towards control and group machinations draws him to such a form of political organization. One of Limbour's central critiques is that surrealism is only falsely political as it is, that Breton is nothing but a "vulgaire 'sympathisant'" who refuses to be engaged with the true issues of the day: "Ainsi, mouche du coche communiste, M. Breton ne mettra pas la main à la pâte; il a des mains trop fines pour ce levain sanglant" (142). Limbour's main critique of surrealism is that, too removed from true revolutionary activity, it fails to engage with the

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<sup>44</sup> This is a common refrain leveled against surrealism.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Limbour, "Lettre," in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives I*, 140. Citations given parenthetically.

masses. Instead, it pays false homage to communist rhetoric while remaining focused on its own milieu, a veritable closed society of intellectuals:

“A un degré d’expression près: l’action, nous sommes hors la loi,” clame-t-il, en effet, sur ce ton de vantardise et d’impudeur qui lui est particulier. Et en effet, que pèse l’action auprès d’un petit écrit révolutionnaire distribué uniquement dans un cercle restreint d’intellectuels? Qu’est-ce que l’action? Ce degré, ce cheveu. (141)

This critique – that surrealism only speaks a revolutionary language to other intellectuals – essentially turns the model of the secret society against Breton. Rather than engaging in a political struggle with and for the masses, surrealism remains only interested in itself. This represents a variation on Daumal’s criticism that surrealist games are nothing but an intellectual pastime, but here it is rendered in political terms rather than mystical ones: revolutionary tracts mean nothing if their only audience is made up of other bourgeois intellectuals. It also underlines how closely politics in these debates over the avant-garde is tied to collective action; surrealism’s critics assert that action means nothing if it remains restricted to a small elite public. The effect is to accuse surrealism of being too much of a secret society, turned inwards rather than engaged with the true problems and concerns of the masses.

As with Daumal’s critiques of surrealism, the criticism offered by the contributors to *Un cadavre* allows for a better understanding of the function that the secret society plays within the debate over surrealism and the avant-garde. The discourse on the secret society serves as a framework for articulating the “correct” form that revolutionary politics ought to take. As Breton attempts to move from the metaphor of the secret society to its actual practice, his critics employ the metaphor to critique the group’s practices. Here the rhetoric of the secret society essentially accuses the avant-garde of being too much of an elite culture, one divorced from the

masses and thereby removed from true political power.<sup>46</sup> By tying surrealism to esoteric traditions, cults, and anarchist, surrealism's critics create a damning association between the avant-garde group, religion, and poor politics. Surrealism is seen as only inconsequentially political, as its action remains essentially tied to individual intrigue (Limbour's critique) and unsuitable means of communication (Bataille's references to Breton's poor "phraséologie"). This represents essentially a refusal of the Breton's belief in the power of the rite of surrealism to usher the individual into a community; for Bataille and others, this movement stops short of true transformation. In other words, they negate the notion that the model of the secret society can only falsely resolve the contradiction between the individual and the community; its politics addresses only a pre-selected audience, its secret languages cannot speak to a larger movement.<sup>47</sup>

### **Surrealism and the Masses**

If the secret society serves an important framework for articulating the politics of the avant-garde, the rise of the masses as a political force posed a particular problem for that model's practice of exclusion. Throughout the 1930s, the dance between the surrealists and the Communist Party would turn around the question of the intellectual's relationship with the masses, and whether or not the Party should serve as the mediator between the two. After many successive ruptures with the Party, surrealism's flirtation with the masses would culminate in Contre-Attaque, the short-lived leftwing group that Breton and Bataille founded during a brief period of reconciliation in 1935. Subtitled "Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires,"

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<sup>46</sup> As seen earlier in Poggioli's characterizations of criticisms of the avant-garde, this accusation of exclusivity is a frequent refrain in discussions of the avant-garde.

<sup>47</sup> Breton would go on to argue in 1935's *Position politique du surréalisme* that automatism serves primarily a function of critique and interpretation, and, in a reversal of the occlusion of the *Second manifeste*, states that the rites of surrealism are "à la portée de tous" (2:438). On the shifting political positions of Breton and other surrealists throughout the 1930s, see Robert S. Short's article "The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-1936," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1966): 2-25; Kirsten Strom's article "'Avant-Garde of What?': Surrealism Conceived of as Political Culture," *Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 37-49; Nadeau's *Histoire du surréalisme*.

Contre-Attaque was created in reaction to the rise of fascism in France, evidenced most spectacularly by the vicious rightwing riots that erupted in February 1934, as well as to the growing militarization and mobilization of the French government. For the intellectuals who founded Contre-Attaque, the group was intended as precisely that: a counter-attack, a movement that would remain on the offensive against the right, appropriating fascism's tools in order to use them against it. Moreover, Contre-Attaque continued surrealism's splits from other existing leftist movements, on the one hand deeming the Popular Front's uniting of socialists, communists and radicals as too "defensive" in its approach, and on the other, thoroughly rejecting the Communist International's insistence that intellectuals abide by a set aesthetic program pre-approved by the Soviet Union. While short-lived, the movement assembled intellectuals, including many current and former surrealists, and published tracts and manifestos aimed at critiquing the current political order. Rivalries continued inside the group, and disagreements over the substance of joint statements were fairly common, and so by May 1936 – just eight months after its founding – Contre-Attaque had essentially disbanded.<sup>48</sup>

While its history was brief, Contre-Attaque nevertheless represents a next stage for Breton's politicization of surrealism. At the end of the preface to *Position politique du surréalisme*, Breton states that his desire to see surrealism as a method of creation reconciled with a larger movement of the liberation of the individual has led him to consider the importance of immediate action, concluding with Contre-Attaque's original call-to-arms. This founding declaration recalls – in its insistence on immediate experiences, violence, and opposition to the institutions of authority – other avant-garde manifestos, serving as both a description and a call-to-arms. The goal the group gives itself is "la création organique d'une vaste composition de forces, disciplinée, fanatique, capable d'exercer le jour venu une autorité impitoyable" (2:497),

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<sup>48</sup> For the history of Contre-Attaque, see Robert S. Short's "Contre-Attaque."

and in their subsequent conferences to Contre-Attaque, Bataille and Breton return to these themes: “organic” movements originating from the masses (rather than imposed from above), “fanatic” collective exaltations, and the appropriation of “authority” and power to bring about the revolution.<sup>49</sup> The communal declaration insists on the cause of the worker, but also defines a unique position for the intellectual: the emergence of “new forms” in politics, in particular those of a new fascist superstructure, necessitates the study of these forms to understand their usage in revolutionary politics. Or, as the declaration states: “nous entendons à notre tour nous servir des armes créées par le fascisme qui a su utiliser l’aspiration fondamentale des hommes à l’exaltation affective et au fanatisme” (2:499). Moreover, Bataille and Breton constantly critique contemporary politics, seen as endless negotiations and phrasemongering, rather than action.<sup>50</sup>

In Breton’s speeches to Contre-Attaque, he returns a position (already developed in 1935’s *Position politique du surréalisme*) that the intellectual has an important role to play in the revolutionary struggle. Noting how fascism has created new forms of politics (including grand cermonials, parades, and radio addresses), Breton stresses that it is the intellectual who must respond to these concerns: “L’étude des superstructures sociales doit devenir la base de toute action révolutionnaire. Les superstructures nouvelles, qui tendent à jouer depuis la guerre un rôle politique prépondérant, doivent faire l’objet de toute notre attention” (2:592). Contre-Attaque’s mission is thus one of study, of examination and appropriation, what Breton calls the intellectual’s “apport spécifique dans le jeu social aujourd’hui” (2:593). He goes on to suggest that a possible role for Contre-Attaque is in the creation of a “cérémonial de grand style.” This reclamation of the intellectual’s autonomy does underline the question of the masses, namely:

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<sup>49</sup> On the myths of politics and community at work in Contre-Attaque, see Nikolaj Lübecker, *Myth and Recognition in Twentieth-Century French Literature and Thought* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> On Bataille’s contribution to the politics of Contre-Attaque, see Susan R. Suleiman’s “Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 69-74.



how do you reconcile a spontaneous movement of the street with an intellectuals' union, one designed to study and appropriate fascism's tools, presumably with the intention of using the masses against fascism? Can spontaneity be reconciled with intellectual programming? This is in some ways a magnification on a political level of one of the dilemmas already noted within surrealism: how to reconcile group action with its individual participants.<sup>51</sup> The problem of audience remains crucial, since the readers of the texts by Contre-Attaque are other intellectuals, rather than the masses who are ostensibly the focus of the movement.

These tensions become even more interesting at the end of a speech by Breton speech on 8 December 1935, particularly in light of the ways in which the secret society model resurfaces as a political option. After beginning with a typical assessment of the problems of capitalism, Breton cites a "coup de théâtre" that had taken place earlier that day in the Parliament: "Croix-de-Feu, socialistes, et communistes d'accord pour désarmer et dissoudre les organisations à caractère paramilitaire" (2:604). What Breton is referring to is the day's news that, in response to mounting tensions and terrorist attempts, the Parliament had decided to prohibit all leagues and paramilitary organizations. In other words, just at the moment when Breton and Bataille want to found a league, they find themselves at the receiving end of a parliamentary maneuver that prohibits their very existence. Setting aside all of the ironies of a group insisting on the autonomy of the intellectual being confronted with an imposition of Parliamentary authority, the moment is an interesting one, where politics and history again seem to determine the ways that the avant-garde is articulated. Faced with Contre-Attaque's prohibition by the government, Breton advocates "un regroupement serré de toutes les énergies susceptibles de porter l'homme en avant," and that "il faut pour cela que ces énergies trouvent le moyen de se rassembler et de se

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<sup>51</sup> This tension is made even more marked by the actual texts of Contre-Attaque, both by Breton and Bataille, which, although they make the case for direct action, are nevertheless grandiloquent philosophical texts.

coordonner dans un cadre neuf” (2:605). This “cadre neuf” is, in fact, a return to the closed society: “un ensemble d’hommes d’une homogénéité et d’une cohésion parfaits” (2:607). Rather than the exaltation of the masses or an explosive movement in the street, Breton proposes a contraction. Moreover, the model for this intimacy cited by Breton is that of the fraternal order. In other words, the play between the manifest and the secret is once again in play, but on a larger, and entirely political, level: Contre-Attaque, a group using manifestos to call for protests – *manifestations* – must turn towards the secret, towards the closed community. This seeming contradiction – what Breton terms as a turn towards “l’intimité de [la] foule” (2:608) – allows for a sort of mediation between the individual and the masses. Breton returns several times to the power of the masses, but he also stresses their danger, citing Freud’s analyses of crowds. A “perfectly homogeneous and cohesive” group thus serves as an intermediary, a collective that is at once tied to the masses while remaining distinct from them. Interestingly, Breton’s advocacy of an elite artistic intellectual party in some ways resonates through history with Saint-Simon’s original concept of the artists as an “avant-garde” of social reform. Rather than an insistence on aesthetic exclusion and extremism, his reclamation of the closed society is intended for the use of mass communications and ceremonials, a means of moving the masses.

In fact, Breton makes a full circle to the *Second manifeste* by returning to the invocations of the power of magic. First, he argues that Contre-Attaque’s next practical step might be to form a small group of directors, kept secret in order to escape prosecution by the Parliament, whose goal would be to come up with “un plan d’exaltation des masses connu seulement de quelques-uns” (2:611). This tactic is then justified by a return to the occult: “Contre-Attaque, par le fait même qu’elle a cru devoir, dans les circonstances présentes, proclamer le primat de l’affectif sur le rationnel, s’est placée, bon gré, mal gré, dans le cadre magique” (2:610-611).

The balance between the avant-garde's tendency towards exclusion and its gesture towards mass political movements has again reached a critical juncture, one difficult to maintain. Rather than a continued dedication to an avant-garde "open to all," the return to occultation in 1935 becomes one of both historical necessity and, at least for Breton, untapped potential. He implies that the political project of Contre-Attaque ("proclamer le primat de l'affectif sur le rationnel") necessarily entails this return to the occult. As he says in his final words to Contre-Attaque, it is by concealment and secrecy that magic gains its power: "Il n'est donc pas mauvais qu'elle [Contre-Attaque] soit rappelée très vite par la force au principe magique fondamental: 'Tout secret divulgué est perdu.' " (2:611). In other words, tell how the trick works, and the spell is broken.

It could be suggested here that Breton's texts for Contre-Attaque are in some ways "occasional" pieces and should not be given the same consideration as more "rigorous" and developed texts like the *Manifestes*. But to do so would fail to account for the ways in which these speeches are part of a long discourse on the secret society in surrealism, a discourse that both Breton and others have consistently returned to. Thus, it is also possible to argue that Breton is simply contradicting himself, or perhaps showing his true colors: he never liked the masses, he is revealing his propensity for the clandestine.<sup>52</sup> But I think that the secret society as posed by Breton functions here more fundamentally, in both a practical and a philosophical sense. On the one hand, it poses a collective that is both of the masses and separate from them, a group capable of manifesting in the street while remaining secret. It thus offers not so much a model of substitution for the masses but rather one of mediation, capable of harnessing the power of the masses. On the other hand, since it establishes a collective that seemingly contains and surpasses the contradictions of politics – the "intimité de la foule" – the secret society is offered

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<sup>52</sup> This is Robert S. Short's argument in "Contre-Attaque," 153.

as a possibility as the transformational revolutionary force that Contre-Attaque aspires to. It recalls the surrealist idea of attaining a point where contradictions cease to be considered as such, a virtual putting into practice of surrealist philosophy.

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The role that the secret society plays in debates over surrealism helps to define a theory and practice of the avant-garde, and its slippery nature and changing definitions are, rather than a proof of lack of rigor, a testament to the tensions inherent to outlining an artistic and political avant-garde during the interwar period. The notions of initiation, exclusion, and political revolt all resonate with the project that Breton gives to surrealism in his texts. The contradictions contained in the concept of secret society go a long ways towards explaining why it among models remains central to the articulation of the surrealist project. In his manifestos, Breton effectively claims a model that is able to assume both the secret and the manifest: he reveals through the occult, and vice versa. As a group both known and hidden in the shadows, with secret rituals to be practiced and revealed by Breton, the secret society offers the possibility of maintaining a group where this contradictory state between the hidden and the revealed, between the latent and the manifest, can be maintained, and moreover, put into practice. Indeed, the importance here of the *group* as a category also speaks to the importance of the secret society to surrealism, as Breton maintained that the individual practices of automatism would serve as means of transformation and accession of and into a collective. Thus, the process of initiation into a secret society allows for this state by which the individual rite becomes a collective practice, a further resolution of the contradictory states of reality. This interplay between the individual and the community has a literary or artistic value, as it indicates a theory of avant-garde practice that goes beyond simple production of individual poems or works to a

transformation of consciousness and reality. But it also has a necessary political value, since this transformative gesture implies an undoing of the bourgeois order. Here, too, the function of the secret society can be seen, as it serves to articulate a group practice that works politically since the mythology of the secret society is one of manipulating (and possibly overturning) the political order. Thus the model of the secret society allows for Breton to articulate an avant-garde practice that is able to assume and ideally overcome various crucial contradictions.

However, the difficulty with this model is that the very contradictions that it embodies allow for surrealism to be attacked on the same grounds that it actively claims. Hence the criticisms from other avant-garde groups that it is both not enough of a secret society and too much of one. The contradictory nature of the secret society might speak towards its attraction to Breton, but it also demonstrates the difficulty that surrealism has in maintaining this contradictory position. It allows for the *Grand Jeu* to reject practices of Breton's group as inauthentic initiations, focused more on individual amusement than on real group transformation, at the same time that it allows Bataille and Limbour to argue that Breton's surrealism cannot be truly revolutionary because it is too focused on a limited group. Through these critiques, the secret society functions as something of a metaphorical cipher, a framework whose very tensions and contradictions allow for critics to project a vision of the avant-garde and make a claim about its practice. In fact, it is in response to these criticisms that Breton's own use of the secret society shifts, moving from one in which the rite of initiation is privileged to one in which exclusion predominates.

The function of the secret society in debates over surrealism is to articulate the complex project of the group, an attempt at resolving the dilemmas of individual practice and collective action, of latent secrets and manifest revelations, of group politics and mass movements. It

creates a sort of rhetorical continuity for communicating the avant-garde project, even as the emphasis shifts between initiation and exclusion, and from metaphor to practice. But the difficulty arises once one has stepped outside of surrealism's project and its reclamation of contradictions, for then it almost seems an untenable model to maintain. In other words, accepting the secret society model already entails (to draw on Poggioli's argument) an *initiation* into the principle of the avant-garde, an almost tautological prospect. Without accepting the terms of surrealism, the secret society runs the risk of becoming only one side of the dialectic relationship: secrecy without the revealing, individual rituals without the collective, language without the communication, violence without the revolution. But in embracing those contradictions, in assuming the tensions inherent to the avant-garde, the project of surrealism was to attempt to overcome its limits and pass into the realm of myth, to become a secret society.

## Chapter 4

### Techniques of Fraternity: Romains, Malraux, and The Seduction of the Secret Society

André Breton's infamous declaration in the *Deuxième manifeste du surréalisme* that the purest surrealist act would be to descend into the street, shooting blindly, exemplifies the ominous shadow that the threat of spectacular violence cast over interwar French literature. Often this aggressive phantasm is embodied by the lone, threatening figure: the terrorist Hong in Malraux's *Les Conquérants*, the militant Lazare in Bataille's *Le Bleu du ciel*, the protagonist of Sartre's short story "Erostrate." This latter example, the misanthropic Paul Hilbert, provides a particularly powerful articulation of the impulse of shock and awe, of the desire to inflict pure terror on the masses he abhors. Hilbert's desire to become a weapon – "un être de l'espèce des revolvers, des pétards, des bombes"<sup>1</sup> – leads to a crime reminiscent of Breton's dictum of pure surrealism: revolver in hand, he shoots blindly into a crowd, without any seeming rhyme or reason. The fear he wishes to bring to the masses is his only goal: "Voilà ce que je voudrais, les étonner tous."<sup>2</sup> Hilbert takes Breton's artistic act and turns into a real act of terror.

The fascination with terrorism in the 1920s and 1930s was not limited to literature, particularly within the context of conspiratorial politics, which were often presented in political discourse as acts of terror. While acts of violence and intimidation have a long history in politics, "terrorism" as a term is traditionally traced back to the Jacobin Reign of Terror in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when the threat of violence was used against the citizenry. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the semantics of the term shifted, focusing instead on acts perpetuated against the state, rather than on its behalf. The revolutionary impulse of

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, "Erostrate," in *Le Mur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 88.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, "Erostrate," 86.

political movements in early twentieth-century Europe often found itself expressed through acts of political terror: bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings were all part of the strategies of revolutionary groups from anarchists and Bolsheviks to the right-wing nationalist movement La Cagoule. By 1937, the League of Nations had defined terrorism as “all criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or groups of persons in the general public.”<sup>3</sup> Conspiratorial tactics, in other words, often occasioned a semantic shift towards terror, with the attempt at seizing power perceived as a criminal act against the state or the public.

While the lone terrorist agent and fears of conspiracy have proven to be enduring images of interwar French culture, there also exist representations of collective conspiracies that do not fall into these established categories. In this chapter, I will analyze two such cases: André Malraux’s 1933 novel *La Condition humaine* and Jules Romains’s multivolume portrait of World War I-era France, *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*. The comparison between these two particular authors might perhaps appear surprising, given the opposite poles each seems to occupy in terms of the interwar French novel, with Malraux’s focused narratives of revolution standing in sharp contrast to the sweep of Romains’s 27-volume portrait of an entire generation. Despite their distinct differences in focus, Malraux and Romains’s stories of conspiracy share one important commonality: they are, at their core, narratives of failure. The 1927 Communist uprising in Shanghai depicted in *La Condition humaine* is violently suppressed by a better-armed coalition and a better-organized political apparatus; and the clandestine organizations that populate *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, most notably Freemasonry, lead only to the deception and disgust of

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Crowwhite, *Murder in the Métro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 3. Brunelle and Finley-Crowwhite provide a critical comparison of interwar and contemporary definitions of terrorism. See as well Vincent Burns and Kate Dempsey Peterson, *Terrorism: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005).



the characters who had seen them as an instrument of power. The fears of a Bolshevik putsch and a Masonic plot were well-trafficked conspiracy theories in the 1920s and 1930s, and yet the novels ultimately depict both of these groups in decidedly non-paranoid ways, portraying them as unable to prevent tragedy, much less seize power.<sup>4</sup> In the place of such a paranoid reading, I will argue that these two authors focus upon practices of conspiracy – secret communications, seizure of arms, chains of command, assassinations – in order to pose the secret, restricted group as a form of concrete action, one that is able to effectively bring together isolated individuals into a fraternal community. In this regard, the appeal of secret societies in these texts functions much in the same way as Denis Hollier sees the role of the military in interwar French literature, as a means of accessing a fraternal ideal, what Hollier calls “une potion magique contre l’angoisse de l’homme seul, la promesse républicaine de faire partie d’un tout.”<sup>5</sup>

In *La Condition humaine*, this exploration of fraternity occurs though one of the key moments from the Chinese Revolution: communist insurgents attempt to wrest control of Shanghai in 1927 following a strategy agreed upon by the official communist-nationalist alliance between the Comintern and the Kuomintang.<sup>6</sup> After an initial success, the Shanghai revolutionaries are first abandoned by the Comintern and then brutally suppressed by nationalist forces led by Chiang Kai-shek and supported by the backing of Chinese commercial and banking interests. Despite this dramatic historical background, the novel’s focus is famously restricted, centered on the efforts of the members of one of the revolutionary groups, including Tchen, a

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<sup>4</sup> Frédéric Monier has shown both how the fear of a communist putsch in France was a direct result of the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the Comintern in 1920, and how that popular representation of that fear drew upon the imaginary of previous conspiracy theories, such as those targeting Masons, Jesuits, and Jews. See his *Complot dans la République*, especially chapters 5 and 8.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Hollier, “L’Adieu aux plumes,” in *Les Dépossédés* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993), 188-189.

<sup>6</sup> André Malraux, *La Condition humaine*, in *Oeuvres complètes I*, ed. Pierre Brunel et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1989). All page references to *La Condition humaine* will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation *CH*.

terrorist; Kyo, one of the revolt's leaders; and Katow, a Russian participant in the uprising. Their efforts, and thus the novel's plot, present an almost textbook version of the tactics employed by a revolutionary group attempting to gain control over the central nervous system of a city: seizure of arms, siege of means of transportation, organization of a general strike crippling commercial interests. Yet *La Condition humaine* is also a story of philosophical reflection, with the plot of the Shanghai revolution serving as a framework within which Malraux investigates the themes of solitude and community, free will and destiny, all dominated by what Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle calls the "présence obsédante de la mort."<sup>7</sup>

Much as Malraux's narrative can be considered a mastery of restraint and focus, Jules Romains's *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* appears as the very embodiment of breadth and scope. Composed of 27 volumes published regularly between 1932 and 1946, *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* depicts a 25-year period of the Third Republic, what Romains termed a "historical wave" beginning in 1908 and ending in 1933, placing the catastrophe of World War I in the center of its trough.<sup>8</sup> *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* was intended to be the novelistic representation of Romains's theory of unanimism, the search for those moments when individual souls are fused into a collective spirit. While portraying a wide range of characters from different milieus, the novel takes as its main focus the close friendship of two students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Pierre Jallez and Jean Jerphanion, whose relationship demonstrates the potential for human connection. The pair also presents a study in contrasts for social engagement, with Jallez attracted to the commentary of journalism and academia, and Jerphanion drawn to the ideal of political action in various manifestations. Jerphanion's path to engagement leads him to a fellow

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *L'Illusion politique au XXe siècle* (Paris: Editions Economica, 1999), 300.

<sup>8</sup> Romains addresses his idea of the "onde historique" in *Ai-je fait ce que j'ai voulu?* (Paris: Wesmael-Charlier, 1964), 109-111.

student, Laulerque, who proposes the idea of the secret society as a possibility for finding both spiritual communion and political action. In two intertwined narratives spanning several of the volumes of *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* – principally *Eros de Paris* (1932), *Recherche d'une église* (1934), and *Montée des périls* (1935) – Jerphanion and Laulerque both flirt with different secret societies – Freemasonry and a terrorist cell, respectively – before resigning when each realizes that the organizations are either unwilling or powerless to stop World War I.<sup>9</sup>

The first section of this chapter situates Romain and Malraux's novels within the context of subversive politics in the interwar period, particularly in relation to the ways in which conspiracies were seen as representing both a political technique and a fraternal order. I suggest that the value and function of the conspiracies represented in these texts can be understood in what might be considered technical terms: their interest in Bolshevism and Masonry ought to be interpreted in terms of their execution of practices of conspiracy or secrecy, independent of their ideological goals. Such a reading takes its distances from previous critics' attempts to read Malraux's portrayal of Bolshevism in *La Condition humaine* and Romain's depiction of Freemasonry in *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* as evidence of the authors' commitment to the Communist Party or a Radical-Party vision of republicanism, respectively.<sup>10</sup> This approach also distinguishes itself from critical appraisals that have cited Malraux and Romain independently of each other for representing fraternity in abstract or idealized terms: Malraux's investigation of the problem between individual and collective action is often deemed a question of metaphysics,

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<sup>9</sup> Jules Romain, *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, 4 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1958). Citations from Romain's novels will be given parenthetically by both volume and page number, with the following abbreviations: *EP* (*Eros de Paris*), *RE* (*Recherche d'une église*), *MP* (*Montée des périls*).

<sup>10</sup> For a critic who makes both of those claims in the same text, see Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's *L'Illusion politique au XXe siècle* (Paris: Economica, 1999).

and Romain's theory of unanimism is posed as a form of spiritual or religious communion.<sup>11</sup> While not negating the metaphysical or spiritual dimensions to both their works, I will demonstrate in the last sections of the chapter that both authors use the representation of Freemasonry and the communist cell to explore what I would call techniques of fraternity, secret actions whose value lies in their ability to create concrete ties between individuals. These techniques, largely absent any ideological content, ultimately inform their aesthetic visions for the novel, providing methods of discipline and organization for the representation of the collective experience of fraternity.

### **Conspiratorial Technique**

The political discourse of paranoia during the interwar period in France often seems to suggest a variation on Sartre's famous observation that "une technique romanesque renvoie toujours à la métaphysique du romancier."<sup>12</sup> As both communism and fascism spread across European nations, the fear that the Third Republic would be brought down by a left-wing putsch or a right-wing plot also began a steady creep into the French political consciousness. Given their outright hostility to the ideal of the open regime of liberal democracy, those ideologies were seen, by their very nature, as incubating conspiratorial aspirations. In such a climate, as Sartre might have put it, the revolutionary technique of conspiracy always seemed to refer back to ideology of the revolutionary.<sup>13</sup> But in 1931, as a rejoinder to the argument that ideology always informs conspiracies, the Italian journalist and novelist Curzio Malaparte published the French

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<sup>11</sup> For two early but typical examples, see Gaëtan Picon's *André Malraux* (Paris, Gallimard, 1945), who refers to Malraux's investigation of fraternity, solitude, history, and experience as a "métaphysique vécue" (61); and André Cuisenier's *Jules Romains et l'unanimisme*, 3 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1935-54), who cites the unanimist goal of creating between elevating separate individuals into a "famille spirituelle" (III.280).

<sup>12</sup> Sartre's claim was made in 1937 in relation to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. See Sartre's article "A propos de *Le Bruit et la fureur*: La temporalité chez Faulkner," in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 66.

<sup>13</sup> On the specific fears of a communist plot or a fascist putsch, see chapters 3 and 5 of Frédéric Monier's *Complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1998).

translation of his political treatise, *Technique du coup d'Etat*.<sup>14</sup> An early proponent of fascism in Italy and an observer of the Roman coup of 1922, Malaparte had fallen out with Mussolini in 1930 and was forced to move into political exile in France, unable to publish his tract in his native country. Drawing on his own first-hand experiences and political philosophy, *Technique du coup d'Etat* appeared as a twentieth-century update on Machiavelli's *The Prince*, a manual for seizing power and then holding on to it. From the moment of its publication in France, *Technique* resonated with the political class, primarily since its author offered insights in defending against the types of conspiracies that had led to the much-feared Bolshevik and Fascist Revolutions in Russia and Italy.<sup>15</sup>

Malaparte argues in *Technique du coup d'Etat* that the seizure of power in a state should not be conceived of in terms of ideology, nor based on the political, social, or economic conditions of the country where a revolution takes place. For Malaparte, such an ideological focus represents a grave error, since coups need only be understood in terms of their technical execution: "Le problème du coup d'Etat moderne est un problème d'ordre technique. L'insurrection est une machine, dit Trotski: il faut des techniciens pour la mettre en mouvement, et seules des techniciens peuvent l'arrêter."<sup>16</sup> In Malaparte's view, the fortunes of a revolution do not depend on the mobilization of the masses against the government; instead, he repeatedly insists on the importance of "une poignée d'hommes prêts à tout." That is to say, a revolution's success depends above all on a small, concentrated, and highly capable group of revolutionaries

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<sup>14</sup> Curzio Malaparte, *Technique du coup d'Etat*, French trans. Juliette Bertrand (Paris: Grasset, 1931). Reprinted by Grasset with an introduction by Malaparte in 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Frédéric Monier notes that the book was not a bestseller but did find a certain notoriety among those in the political class seeking to protect the current political order. See his *Complot dans la République*, 241-245. For the circumstances surrounding the French and Italian publications of *Technique*, see chapter 2 of Maurizio Serra's biography *Malaparte, vie et légendes* (Paris: Grasset, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Malaparte, *Technique du coup d'Etat*, 59.

who are able to assume control over the necessary apparatuses of the state: railways, telecommunications, central banks, munitions. Insurgents intent on overthrowing their government should therefore strategically focus their trained forces on a select group of targets, just as fearful states should protect these same targets to insure their grip on power.

Befitting his indifference to political or history, Malaparte's analysis sweeps across ideologies, geographies, and eras, analyzing historical examples of those whom he deems "Catilinaires," political leaders who, like the first-century Roman politician, attempted to wrest power away from their governments: Lenin, Trotsky, Bonaparte, Primo de Rivera, Mussolini, and Hitler, among others. Through a mixture of political analysis, first-hand reporting, and outright fictional exchanges, Malaparte attempts to uncover the logic behind some of the more audacious coups in history, analyzing the secret techniques that official history or ideology neglects. The book describes in many instances a personal and personalized account from behind the scenes of history: Stalin's walk is commented upon as an insight into his demeanor, Bolshevik policy becomes an imagined dialogue between Lenin and Trotsky, and Hitler's virility is put into serious question. And in each case the novelty of Malaparte's approach is to distinctly separate from the historical record two normally intertwined notions: ideology and technique.<sup>17</sup> Such a move represents, for at least one contemporary reader of Malaparte's, the communist intellectual Jean-Richard Bloch, a fulfillment of the intellectual's duty to "faire la toilette de l'esprit," to "frayer la voie aux conceptions de représentations exactes d'un monde entièrement renouvelé."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In his analysis of *Technique*, H.G. Well's *The Open Conspiracy* (1928), and A. Neuberg's *L'insurrection armée* (1931), Monier argues that this represents a moment in French political and legal history when the legal and tactical notion of the plot (*complot*) becomes distinct from that of the mythical and imaginary conspiracy (*conspiration*). See chapter 11 of *Complot dans la République*.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Curzio Malaparte from November 20, 1931, and quoted in *Technique du coup d'État*, xxiv-xxv.

This shift in conspiratorial focus to technique is seen as the needed response to a new world. This link between conspiracies and the need for new forms of representations resurfaces, albeit unrelated to Malaparte, in Roger Caillois's readings of both Malraux and Romain Rolland in the 1940s. In *Puissances du roman*, a 1941 sociological study of the novel, Malraux is presented by Caillois as one of a cohort of international authors (like Hemingway and Ernst Von Salomon) who represent the way that the need for community arises in times of conflict: "Il en est qui rejoignent la guerre partout où elle éclate sur le globe ou qui, conspirateurs et assassins, travaillent à creuser le 'tourbillon' qu'ils espèrent voir brasser les multitudes (et leur espérance n'est pas en vaine). Tous ces 'enfants du chaos' songent à engendrer un ordre, ces nomades, une stabilité."<sup>19</sup> Malraux, then, demonstrates the possibility of founding a new order in the midst of the chaos of the world, amid war, conspiracy, and political intrigue. This idea of "order" reappears in Caillois's essay "Préambule pour l'esprit des sectes," a 1944 essay on religious community, where Romain Rolland's novel *Recherche d'une église* is presented as the proof of a generational "séduction des sociétés secrètes."<sup>20</sup> The language that he uses to describe this secret temptation mirrors that found in *Puissances du roman*: "Ces esprits semblent caresser le projet de fonder une sorte d'Ordre, d'organisation qui joindrait au départ quelques hommes peu satisfaits du monde où ils vivent et désireux de le réformer."<sup>21</sup> The same vocabulary and attitude that Caillois used with Malraux is recycled here to describe the seduction of the secret society: order, dissatisfaction, solidarity, discipline. And, like the multitudes that the novelists hope will be blown away by the world's whirlwind ("le tourbillon qu'ils espèrent voir brasser les

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<sup>19</sup> Roger Caillois, *Puissances du roman* (1941), in *Approches de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 230.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Caillois, "Préambule pour l'Esprit des sectes" (1944), in *Approches de l'imaginaire*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

multitudes”), the secret society also marks its distances from the masses, what he calls “la multitude vaine, prétentieuse et bornée.”<sup>22</sup>

This vocabulary of order, solidarity, and common purpose can in many respects serve as a refrain for a large number of the authors and intellectuals of the interwar era, a point that Denis Hollier makes in his essay “L’Adieu aux plumes.”<sup>23</sup> Hollier interprets this phenomenon through the lens of what he views as the militarization of French letters: war and the military attracted so many writers of the time because they represented at a fundamental level two of the values running through the anti-democratic culture of the time, namely authority and community. But as Caillois’s comments on both Malraux and Romain Rolland suggest, the military was not the only form that communion could take: the conspiratorial society also offers the possibility for joining in a whole that manages to be worth more than the sum of its parts. What shape, then, does this order take if it adopts the techniques of the conspiratorial group?

The first characteristic of the conspiratorial society is a sense of connection that it imparts through the literal sharing of spaces, a physical proximity that allows for the feelings of companionship and solidarity to be literally felt. The appeal of Freemasonry is described by one character in *Recherche d’une église* as the need to “[se] sentir en contact étroit avec d’autres... oui, de [se] sentir les coudes” (*RE*, I.1104). It is the isolated space of a secret chamber, the need to be at a physical remove from the open outside world, that brings human bodies into contact with each other. Early on in *La Condition humaine*, in the small back room of a record store in Shanghai, Tchen goes to meet his comrades after the isolating act of murdering an arms broker: “Leur présence arrachait Tchen à sa terrible solitude, doucement, comme une plante qu’on tire de la terre où ses racines les plus fines la retiennent encore” (*CH*, 518). But it should be noted that

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<sup>22</sup> Caillois, “Préambule pour *L’Esprit des sectes*,” 91.

<sup>23</sup> Denis Hollier, “L’Adieu aux plumes,” in *Les Dépossédés* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993).



this idealized intimacy is conceived of in exclusively masculine terms: the traditional exclusion of women from secret societies becomes here a defining value of fraternity, understood here literally as a male-only domain. This fraternal community is not the society of inverts seen in Proust; instead, the masculine ideal at work here approaches that of a monk's asceticism. The virility that Caillois refers to in speaking of Malraux's generation should not be thought of in terms of sexual conquest; it represents instead a refusal of desire through exclusion.<sup>24</sup>

Just as the conspiratorial order defines itself from within through the ideal of a shared space of virile intimacy, its gesture of exclusion also sets it off from the masses outside. In *La Condition humaine*, the masses are always just on the outskirts of the action, their presence suggested and heard, but never joined by the group; the "multitude qui ne veut pas dormir" always remains apart from the action: "c'était au loin que vivaient les hommes" (*CH*, 517). This is not to say that the masses are not perceived in the novel, but their existence is described – also always at a remove – by the industrial Ferral, rather than the group: "[Ferral] regarda par la fenêtre: dans l'avenue, une foule en mouvement, millions de poissons sous le tremblement d'une eau noire" (*CH*, 595). Just as the secret society has its symbolic space in the hidden chamber, the masses in movement claim the street as their territory. Operating under the logic of the conspiracy, this same space becomes, for Kyo, a sign of strategy, not open displays of power: "Il avait cessé de voir les rues: il ne marchait pas dans la boue, mais sur un plan" (*CH*, 522). Whereas the enclosed space of the conspiracy confers power and intimacy, the streets represent diffusion, a wasting of energy: as Laulerque puts it, "l'action de masse se détend tout de suite

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<sup>24</sup> When Jerphanion visits a Mason's office, he immediately wonders: "Est-ce que cet homme a une vie amoureuse? [...] Quelle place la vie sexuelle tient-elle au juste dans la conception maçonnique du monde?" (*RE*, I.1181). Although the exclusively male secret society is represented more as a form of asexuality, Alain Niderst does note the preponderance of gay male characters in *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, suggesting that they represented for Romans a separate world of mystery. See his *Jules Romains: Les Illusions perdues*, 83-99.

dans la rue” (*EP*, I.553). In a space without limits, the promise of virile action is lost by the relaxing of forces: action becomes dispersed, rather than focused.

This exclusion of the masses is, to be sure, an anti-democratic gesture, one that targets the republican value of equality in the name of fraternity. The manifestations of the masses in the interwar years were marked by a profound ambivalence: they conferred both force and legitimacy to politics, but their force could be turned into destructive power, and their legitimacy corrupted by propaganda or police infiltration.<sup>25</sup> The conspiracy proposes another model of political action, one that, by its separation and enclosure, becomes impervious to outside influence. The accusation of elitism implicit in the secret society model becomes now an advantage, one implying technical and strategic efficiency contrasting with the unpredictable, uncontrollable, lumbering action of the masses: “L’action de masse...a rarement de grandes chances d’aboutir, à cause de sa lourdeur, de sa lenteur de mise en train, de l’excès de publicité qu’elle comporte, du trop grand nombre nécessaire d’exécutants,” argues Laulerque (*EP*, I.552). Likewise, Kyo has prepared the insurrection not from the ground up but in secret, rigorously, “de comité en comité” (*CH*, 522). As we shall see, this notion of efficiency becomes one of the watchwords for Malraux and Romain’s use of the secret society, representing the promise that action can be, in both politics and aesthetics, direct and effective.

Thus the order suggested by the conspiracy is characterized by virility, intimacy, exclusion, and efficiency, creating a whole that represents more than the sum of its parts. It should be noted that, in both Caillois and Hollier’s analyses, this valorization of the community

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<sup>25</sup> The ambivalence of the masses becomes particularly felt after the fascist riots of February 1934, and as I will discuss in subsequent chapters, the secret society’s function as an alternative to the masses also changes. The texts by Malraux and Romain that I analyze here are all written prior to or during 1934, and thus do not bear the weight of that historical event. See Susan R. Suleiman’s “Bataille in the Streets: The Search for Virility in the 1930s,” *Critical Inquiry* 21.1 (Autumn 1994), 61-79, for an analysis of the street as a literary and political symbol in the 1930s. For the history of mass protests in the Third Republic, see Danielle Tartakowsky, *Le Pouvoir est dans la rue: Crises politiques et manifestations en France* (Paris: Aubier, 1998).

at the expense of the individual is to be located on the level of content: a novel's characters belong to a secret group or an army regiment, symbolizing at the level of intrigue a desire for community. But I do not think it is a coincidence that the temptation of the secret society manifests itself in novels by Malraux and Romain Rolland characterized by polyphonic techniques of narration. Both *La Condition humaine* and *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* are marked by a proliferation of characters with different voices and narratives – what Drieu la Rochelle referred to in Malraux's case as “cette dispersion des hommes engagés dans une action” – who all operate without an imposing authorial or narratorial presence.<sup>26</sup> This aesthetic choice is at once a sign of their times: Malraux's and Romain Rolland's novels belong to the same era as works like *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, texts that sought to push the boundaries of the traditional novel. But the particular use of the polyphonic techniques represents an attempt to move away from narratives centered on an individual, be it a central character or the author.

In his preface to *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, Romain Rolland in particular cites this aesthetic choice as a response to the individualistic vision of the world implied by the traditional novel. While the breadth of *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* might recall to more than one reader Balzac's *Comédie humaine* or Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series, Romain Rolland pushed against those comparisons, arguing that those novels failed to authentically portray a whole society or era in the way that he was. Part of his critique is a question of design: Balzac only conceived of *La Comédie humaine* late into its composition, so one can read *Eugénie Grandet* without needing to know anything about, say, the secret society novels of *L'Histoire des Treize*. But Romain Rolland also offers a critique of his predecessors' focus: Balzac's stories turn on individual heroes, and Zola's choice of one family appears artificial and unconvincing. Romain Rolland argues that such a focus

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<sup>26</sup> Drieu la Rochelle, *Sur les écrivains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 286. For the classic study of the polyphonic novel, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

cannot then take society as its true subject since it is too centered on the individual: “Le besoin de tout rapporter à un personnage central se rattache à une vision de l’univers social où l’individu est le centre” (I.8). The traditional form of the novel is appropriate, Romain Rolland suggests, as long as it wishes to express such an individualist point of view. But it becomes a vestige (“une survivance”) when the novel’s subject becomes instead “un vaste ensemble humain, avec une diversité de destinées individuelles qui y cheminent chacune pour leur compte” (I.9). To represent such a collective, a new form needs to take shape, one that manages to express a multitude of voices that manage to coexist in the same text. As I will demonstrate, it is precisely Romain Rolland’s and Malraux’s representations of secret techniques that inform their vision of a collective form.

### **Malraux’s Brotherhood of Arms**

My discussion of the representation of conspiratorial techniques in *La Condition humaine* takes as its point of departure a criticism of the novel by the Soviet journalist and critic Ilya Ehrenburg. Writing in 1933, Ehrenburg declared of Malraux’s work: “Ce n’est pas un livre sur la révolution ni sur une épopée, c’est un journal intime, des sténogrammes de ses discussions antérieures, une radioscopie de lui-même fragmenté en plusieurs héros.”<sup>27</sup> Ehrenburg’s critique that the novel is more centered on Malraux’s personal concerns than on the Chinese Revolution is not entirely incorrect. Malraux himself alluded to the relationship between the historical specificity of his novel and the fundamental philosophical problems it raises in a letter to the critic Gaëtan Picon: “Le cadre n’est naturellement pas fondamental. L’essentiel est évidemment ce que vous appelez l’élément pascalien. Mais ce cadre n’est pas non plus accidentel. Je crois qu’il y a dans une époque assez peu de lieux où les conditions d’un héroïsme possible se trouvent

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<sup>27</sup> Cited by Jean Lacouture, *André Malraux: Une vie dans le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 148.

réunies.”<sup>28</sup> For Malraux, the question is not so much an accurate portrayal of the Chinese Revolution but rather an investigation of the human condition and the possibility for heroic action. In this sense, he is presenting a variation of an argument he made in response to Trotsky’s critique that Malraux’s previous novel on the Chinese Revolution, *Les Conquérants* (1928), was a false portrayal of the politics of the revolutionary struggle, offering too many historical inaccuracies and infidelities to be taken as a true document. In his response to Trotsky, Malraux insists on his work as a novel, one more intent on examining philosophical issues than on realistically depicting the Chinese Revolution: “Ce livre n’est pas une ‘chronique romancée’ de la révolution chinoise parce que l’accent principal est mis sur le rapport entre des individus et une action collective, non sur l’action collective seule.”<sup>29</sup> His novels, the author argues, should not be taken at their political face value because they are works of fiction, which implies, among other choices, a selection of a point of view and an aesthetic vision.

Malraux’s framing of the issue of his novels – an inessential political and historical context against a fundamental philosophical investigation – is one that, by and large, critics have repeated, structuring their appreciations of Malraux’s novels, and in particular *La Condition humaine*, in two main broad approaches. The first such tendency is to stress the philosophical element at the expense of the historical. This trend is perhaps best summed up by one of its early spokesmen, Emmanuel Mounier, who in *L’Espoir des désespérés*, claims that all of Malraux’s characters are “metaphysicians,” explorers who attempt to find meaning through action. Their involvement in a revolutionary politics does not matter; the main issue is the philosophical

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<sup>28</sup> Gaëtan Picon, *Malraux par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), 2. For an analysis of the particular historical and cultural importance of Shanghai as a city of Otherness, see Leon S. Roudiez’s “*La Condition humaine*: An Awareness of the Other,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 24.3 (Autumn 1978), 303-313.

<sup>29</sup> André Malraux, “Réponse à Trotsky,” in *Oeuvres complètes I*, 309.

conflict between being and doing that they represent.<sup>30</sup> But this trend has continued to recent considerations of the novelist, such as Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's description of a Janus-faced Malraux, with a "metaphysical conception of politics" before the war giving way to the politically realist member of de Gaulle's government.<sup>31</sup> This insistence on the philosophical themes of Malraux's novel has, as W.M. Frohock has suggested, been influenced by Malraux's personal turn away from communism to Gaullism, as well as by the debates that surfaced in postwar France over Stalinist purges: by claiming Malraux as above all a philosophical writer, the complicated edges of the portrait of revolutionary author can be made clean.<sup>32</sup>

A second critical tendency seeks to correct this metaphysical bent, arguing that, in point of fact, *La Condition humaine* is a "faithful" representation of the communist revolutionary struggle. This approach asserts that, contrary to his own statements, Malraux had listened to Trotsky's critiques, rendering his novel more Trotskyist than he would admit. For example, in *Pour une sociologie du roman*, Lucien Goldmann analyzes the Malraux-Trotsky conflict in order to show how it played a "primordial role" in the evolution of Malraux's political and aesthetic vision, as evidenced by the fact that Trotsky's opinion holds what he deems "a considerable place" in *La Condition humaine*, mainly through Kyo.<sup>33</sup> Dudley Andrew and Stephen Ungar have recently made a similar claim, arguing that the novel's stylistic breaks and ellipses represent a belief that revolution cannot be imposed from above, an approach they compare to

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<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Mounier, *L'Espoir des désespérés* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), 28.

<sup>31</sup> As Loubet del Bayle puts it, "on peut dire que son engagement politique correspond à une conception 'métaphysique' de la politique, parce qu'il est pour lui l'aboutissement d'une recherche qui est au premier chef une recherche philosophique et métaphysique." See his *L'Illusion politique au XXe siècle*, 299.

<sup>32</sup> See W.M. Frohock's *André Malraux and the Tragic Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967).

<sup>33</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 99.

montage in Soviet-era filmmaking.<sup>34</sup> The difficulty in arriving at such a firm conclusion is that Trotsky's opinion is not the only opinion in the novel; *La Condition humaine* is remarkable for its lack of an over-arching narrative presence that would indicate a clear political position. And it is equally possible to suggest that the failure of the Shanghai revolutionaries could be interpreted as a rejection of Trotsky's theory of armed insurrection.

While antithetical in their ultimate conclusions, both of these arguments reproduce similar gestures, placing ideology and philosophy at the center of the discussion: either Malraux's novel must be understood in terms of metaphysics, at the expense of politics, or, on the other hand, in terms of communist ideology before metaphysics.<sup>35</sup> But I'd like to return to Ehrenburg's critique of the novel to propose another way of understanding the representation of the revolutionary organization in *La Condition humaine*. For Ehrenburg, the problem is not just that the novel is an X-ray of Malraux's obsessions but rather that its focus is misplaced:

La révolution qu'a vécue un grand pays devient l'histoire d'un groupe de conspirateurs. Ces conspirateurs savent mourir héroïquement, mais, dès les premières pages du roman, il est clair qu'ils doivent mourir. Ils raisonnent énormément... Certes, ils s'occupent beaucoup de distribuer des fusils, mais il est difficile de dire à quoi leur servent ces fusils.<sup>36</sup>

Ehrenburg's claim that the Chinese revolution has become a history of conspirators is at once correct and misleading: while the focus of Malraux's novel remains tied to the actions of a select

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<sup>34</sup> Dudley Andrew and Stephen Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 98

<sup>35</sup> Kerry Whiteside has proposed another way out of the metaphysical/political debate, arguing that, in all of Malraux's novels before *L'Espoir*, it is ultimately impossible to decide if they are political or metaphysical, since his metaphysical vision always scrambles the communication of his political opinions. See his "Malraux and the Problem of a Political Metaphysics," *French Forum* 18.2 (May 1993), 195-212.

<sup>36</sup> Cited by Jean Lacouture, *André Malraux: Une vie dans le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 148.

group of insurgents, the book avoids an attempt to explain the entire revolution through their plottings. The choice of focus on a conspiracy does not confer to the novel a conspiratorial vision of history, where the actions of the group serve as an explanation for the secret motive force of real events outside of the domain of the novel. In other words, the novel does not imply that the entire Chinese Revolution is the work of one secret group; rather, that one secret group participated in the Revolution. But it is Ehrenburg's last critique that I wish to focus on, the claim that the characters spend much of the novel distributing arms but that it remains unclear what use the arms are to them. Ehrenburg's argument is a symbolic one: the characters obey a fatality that renders their political action negligible; they can only die, and no quantity of seized arms can negate this tragic realization. While it is certainly true that the seizure and distribution of arms does not prevent their ultimate massacre at the hands of the nationalist forces, the tactic does help us understand how Malraux portrays this group.

*La Condition humaine* can be understood as, in the words of one critic, "primarily...a sequence of events," in that the book does not dwell on lengthy descriptions, interior reflection, or philosophical digressions; the drama always relates to actions, or reactions to those actions.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the first part of the novel, focusing on the initial success of the group, the central events all relate to arms distribution. The novel does not so much follow a particular character, but rather the tactics necessary for gaining control of a cache of guns: Tchen's act of assassination in the initial scene is to steal a document relating to weapons holdings; Kyo then shows this paper to the baron de Clappique, who uses his connections to grant them access to the boat where the guns are stored; a disguised Katow then uses the document to board the ship and hijack the arms, which the group then passes out across the city under the cover of darkness. The seizing of the arms has an important tactical value for the group: they have to use the weapons to

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<sup>37</sup> See W.M. Frohock's *André Malraux and the Tragic Imagination*, 61.



prepare for any struggles with the Shanghai authorities, as well as to signal their own strength to their nationalist allies.

The necessarily clandestine nature of their actions has the effect of adding to the dramatic tension of the novel: Malraux often borrows narrative techniques typical of the detective or adventure novel, from terse ellipses to moments of charged chiaroscuro, to highlight the danger that the revolutionaries face.<sup>38</sup> Take, for example, the scene when Katow must secretly take a small boat to reach the vessel carrying the arms shipment:

La vedette avançait toujours : le roulis était assez fort pour que le silhouette basse et trouble du vapeur semblât se balancer lentement sur le fleuve ; à peine éclairée elle ne se distinguait que par une masse plus sombre sur le ciel couvert. Sans nul doute le *Shan-Tung* était gardé. Le projecteur d'un croiseur atteignit la vedette, la suivit un instant, l'abandonna. (CH, 562)

The dark imprecision of the steamboat, barely perceptible in the night sky, looms as an ominous threat, confirmed by the terse statement of its protected state. The tension of the scene is made more palpable by the light illuminating the ship for a moment, adding to the danger of the moment. This sort of borrowing from stories of conspiracy (such as those of the detective or spy genres) is, as Jean-Michel Gliksohn argues, a question of effectiveness for Malraux. Malraux does with the adventure story what he claimed Faulkner did with the detective genre in *Sanctuary*: use what could be an artistically void narrative as the most effective means of communicating the intensity of an ethical question.<sup>39</sup> The efficiency of the secret society's brand

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<sup>38</sup> On Malraux's use of light as a sign of ethics as well as suspense, see Harris's *André Malraux: L'éthique comme fonction de l'esthétique*, 84-87.

<sup>39</sup> In his 1933 preface to *Sanctuary*, Malraux wrote that the detective story's importance "vient de ce qu'elle est le moyen le plus efficace de traduire un fait éthique et poétique dans toute son intensité." See the "Notice" in *Oeuvres complètes I*, 1273.

of direct action here resonates with the efficiency of the narratives of clandestine action: Malraux's use of a popular genre's techniques to highlight for his reader a more substantial problem – the individual under the threat of danger – is an appropriation of the clandestine group's use of effective techniques to assume power.

But this secret operation also becomes Malraux's method for demonstrating that the Shanghai revolution is not – Ehrenburg's argument notwithstanding – just limited to this group of conspirators. In following the trail of the document and then the guns themselves, the novel demonstrates that an entire city is on the verge of rising up:

[The truck used for passing out the stolen weapons] roulait à travers les rues de la ville chinoise avec un grondement qu'écrasait à chaque cahot un tintamarre de fer-blanc... Il s'arrêtait à chaque *tchon* important: boutique, cave, appartement. Une caisse était descendue; fixée au côté, une note chiffrée de Kyo déterminait la répartition des armes, dont quelques-unes devaient être distribuées aux organisations de combat secondaire. A peine si le camion s'arrêtait cinq minutes. Mais il devait visiter plus de vingt permanences. (*CH*, 564)

The description of the clandestine activity of the group suggests that their actions have a reach extending beyond the tight narrative focus of Kyo on board the truck. Not even taking into consideration the explicit reference to the “organisations de combat secondaire,” everything in this passage communicates with Malraux's typical economy the idea that the arms are destined to be used by forces outside of the restraints of the cell: the use of the imperfect, the repetition of “chaque,” the elliptical reference to the variety of types of distribution points (the “*tchon[s]* important[s]”), the limited time frame suggesting constant action, the precise indication of “plus de vingt permanences” to visit. Despite a total absence of descriptions of interpersonal

exchanges suggesting the existence of other revolutionaries, the scene indicates to the reader that their actions will have an impact beyond the focus of the novel.

The limited field of vision of *La Condition humaine* is one of the signature markers of Malraux's style, a technique that critics often interpret as Malraux's valuing of action as a means of overcoming the profound sense of solitude that characterizes his characters. By focusing only on the acts of the group, rather than on psychology or description, the novel underlines action and its concrete consequences as a means of understanding the world.<sup>40</sup> But I would also argue that the restriction of the point of view in *La Condition humaine* takes its cues from the activity that it narrates, namely the discipline required by a clandestine revolutionary organization. We can see this literary technique as an example of what Denis Hollier has described as the "esthétisation de la contrainte" in the interwar period, the desire for self-imposed limits as a move away from the celebration of liberty. Although Hollier sees this primarily as a matter of content – he cites the industrial figure Ferral in *La Condition humaine* as the "prototype" of this belief – I would argue that Malraux also chooses the focus of the conspiratorial group in order to formally put into place this aesthetic of constraint. The discipline required of the conspiratorial group is one necessarily of limited context and exchange of information; to allow in too many participants is to risk disrupting the mission. In this sense, despite the relative similarities of their revolutionary subject matter, *La Condition humaine*'s taut narrative of the Shanghai uprising stands in contrast to the epic frame provided by the Spanish Civil War in *L'Espoir*.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Harris's *André Malraux: L'éthique comme fonction de l'esthétique*, especially 35-51, as well as Derek W. Allan's "André Malraux: The Commitment to Action in *La Condition humaine*," *French Forum* 6.1 (January 1981), 61-73.

<sup>41</sup> Denis Hollier, "L'Adieu aux plumes," 196-197. Given his focus on the militarization of French letters, Hollier's use of Malraux in his essay is almost exclusively focused on *L'Espoir* as a war novel.

Thus the distribution of arms does not only function as a tactic for revolution in the novel; it also plays a narrative role, moving action along and focusing the novel's field of vision. But this technique also has implications for the representation of community in the novel, portraying an action that concretely unifies the solitary individual to the larger group. In other words, it outlines a technique for fraternity: to create a brotherhood of arms, the novel seems to suggest, there must first be a distribution of arms. When Tchen joins up with another revolutionary group, an officer informs him of their tactical advances: "Nous avons saisi là [the principal arms depot] huit cents fusils. Nous pouvons déjà envoyer des renforts contre ceux qui résistent: vous êtes la troisième équipe que nous secourons." This strategic update immediately has an impact on Tchen: "L'idée des deux cents groupes qui agissaient comme le sien exaltait et troublait Tchen à la fois. Malgré la fusillade que le vent mou apportait de toute la ville, la violence lui donnait la sensation d'une action solitaire" (582). The idea of communal action, inspired by the sounds of gunfire off in the distance, creates both thrills and anxieties for Tchen: it indicates that there is a community of action, and it also reminds him of the world of solitude to which he has been consigned by the irrevocable act of murder at the beginning of the novel.

This use of a revolutionary technique as a symbol for the difficulty of human connection occurs most strikingly in one early example of the group's preparation: Kyo's phonographic recordings. The scene is one of the most celebrated in the novel: two phonographs have been prepared, one emitting only the intermittent sound of a whistle, and the other featuring Kyo's voice reciting a foreign-language lesson of a seemingly standard list of verbs, numbers, and nouns. Yet when played at the same time, the sound of the whistle masks the unnecessary words, allowing for the communication of a secret command to be revealed during the moments when the whistle is silent: *envoyer – trente – hommes*. As a revolutionary technique, the

recordings represent a certain genius, and the narrator stresses both their perfect execution (“Ces faux disques pour l’enseignement des langues étaient excellents: l’étiquette, imitée à merveille,” 520) and the precautions taken with their delivery to the central command in Han-Kéou (“Les disques sifflets étaient expédiés par un bateau: les disques-textes par un autre. Ceux-ci étaient français ou anglais, suivant que la mission de la région était catholique ou protestante,” 521). But the tactic also underscores the role that silence plays in Malraux’s aesthetic vision: it is the moments of noise that mask the superfluous words of the lesson, with silence allowing only the essential information to be communicated.<sup>42</sup> Silence is, of course, one of the defining characteristics of a conspiracy: the interdiction to speech is intended as a protection against infiltration from an enemy.

Despite the technical mastery of the records, Kyo feels a certain odd anxiety while listening to them, because he fails to recognize the sound of his own voice. “Il est rare que l’on reconnaisse sa propre voix, voyez-vous, lorsqu’on l’entend pour la première fois,” the producer of the records explains (*CH*, 520). Later in the novel, Kyo’s unease returns again and again, like a record that skips: “ce disque, *sa* voix qu’il n’avait pas reconnue, tout à l’heure chez Hemmelrich” creates an “inquiétude complexe” as he leaves a bar (*CH*, 528, italics in original); when speaking with his father, “de nouveau, l’obsession du disque l’envahit comme la légère chaleur du délassément envahissait ses jambes” (*CH*, 540); and after he leaves his wife, May, “il y retrouvait l’angoisse, et se souvint des disques: ‘On entend la voix des autres avec ses oreilles, la sienne avec la gorge.’ Oui. Sa vie aussi, on l’entend avec sa gorge, et celle des autres?” (*CH*, 548). Thus a revolutionary tactic becomes a symbol of the anxiety about knowing and communicating with the other: if one’s voice is heard physically, in the throat, what happens

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<sup>42</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard’s *Chambre sourde: L’antiesthétique de Malraux* (Paris: Galilée, 1998) for a meditation on the philosophical implications of Malraux’s aesthetic of silence.

once it leaves the body, when it is heard by others? And further, how can one recognize one's voice, or one's life, if not by the body?<sup>43</sup> The recorded voice presents itself in contrast to the novel's terse use of dialogue: there, communication is as much presence as it is speech, since an interlocutor is always present.<sup>44</sup> Given that the use of the phonographs is above all a conspiratorial technique – it is the need for secrecy and discipline that leads to their recording – the novel would suggest a political corollary to the metaphysical question that Kyo asks: how is an idea be heard, if not through the communication of the voice?

Kyo's ultimately resolves this dilemma by an affirmation of action – “Pour les autres, je suis ce que j'ai fait” (*CH*, 548) – which culminates in his final scene in the novel, when at the moment of his death, as he prepares to swallow a hidden cyanide pill before he can be tortured by the nationalist troops. And, at this precise moment, the records again return: “Il se souvint – le cœur arrêté – des disques de phonographe. Temps où l'espoir conservait un sens!” (*CH*, 734) The records represent a time of hope, both in terms of tactics (they are expedited at the beginning of the insurgency) and community (Kyo's goal of communicating with others). The only option is to kill himself: “mourir est passivité mais se tuer est un acte” (*ibid.*). By dying amidst his fellow prisoners, his body lying next to Katow's, his suicide creates a sense of brotherhood – his is a “mort saturée de ce chevrottement fraternel” – that provides meaning to his own life.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lyotard in particular has taken this statement of hearing one's voice with the throat to be the summation of Malraux's aesthetic philosophy, a voice to be radically understood as silence (since it is not heard through the ears) that an artist must pay heed to.

<sup>44</sup> At the moment he is led into prison, Kyo hears moaning and attempts to discover bodies to attach the voices to: “Kyo regardait de toute son attention, tentait de voir auxquelles de ces ombres appartenaient ces voix si proches de la mort – comme lui peut-être” (287).

<sup>45</sup> Derek Allan has argued that Kyo's suicide, seen by some critics as an example of a reaction to the absurdity of the world, has to be understood as a logical conclusion to Kyo's belief that politics only has meaning in acts, not in a belief in history or ideology. See Allan's “André Malraux: The Commitment to Action in *La Condition humaine*,” 65-68.

But Kyo's suicide is of course not the only such act in the novel: Tchen also kills himself in an unsuccessful attempt at assassinating Chiang Kai-shek by hurling himself under what he believes to be the nationalist leader's car with a bomb strapped to his chest. As a terrorist, Tchen stands for a group within a group, the absolute technician in the midst of the revolutionary conspiracy, and his solitude is constantly underlined: "Tchen était lié aux siens, mais pas assez. Pas assez" (CH, 584). The politicians in the novel perceive this difference in a negative light: Vologuine, the representative of the Comintern, disapproves of Tchen as he does all terrorists, whom he deems "bornés, orgueilleux, et dépourvus de sens politique" (CH, 613). Their lack of political sense renders them unable to understand the value of political compromise or idealism; in Vologuine's opinion they only see assassination as "la voie principale de la vérité politique" (CH, 617). It is not entirely true that Tchen lacks political sense: as a later passage indicates, "Tchen connaissait les objections opposées au terrorisme: répression policière contre les ouvriers, appel au fascisme" (683). In this sense, Tchen distances himself from the terrorist operator in *Les Conquérants*, Hong, who always seems to understand his own role in the revolution in strictly individualist terms: "Sa vie unique. Ne pas la perdre. Voilà."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Tchen demonstrates a certain political savvy: his goal is to heighten the tensions between the Comintern and the Kuomintang through a spectacular act of violence.

Tchen hopes that terrorism will become something more than just a single action, that it will be transformed into something approaching religion: "Il fallait que le terrorisme devînt une mystique" (CH, 682). The profound solitude of his act – "que le terroriste décidât seul, exécutât seul" (ibid.) – attempts to connect with a larger community by serving as an inspiration for others: "Donner un sens immédiat à l'individu sans espoir et multiplier les attentats, non par une

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<sup>46</sup> Malraux, *Les Conquérants*, in *Oeuvres complètes I*, 214. Geoffrey T. Harris refers to Tchen as a "more refined version of Hong." See his *André Malraux: A Reassessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 88.

organisation, mais par une idée: faire renaître des martyrs” (*CH*, 683). Tchen’s “mystique of terrorism” has often been read as the ultimate act of the solitary man, a futile “hyper-individualistic” (in the words of one critic) approach to politics.<sup>47</sup> Tchen notably targets the individual without hope, rather than a community; his ultimate goal is to create more martyrs who will have the mystical experience he summarizes as “la possession complète de soi-même” (*CH*, 646). This critique of Tchen as hyper-individualistic comes in no small part, I would suggest, because it attempts to understand him in terms of ideology: his actions are always interpreted in the service of the revolution in which he participates. But reading Tchen as a tactician allows for the possibility that his act continues the fraternity of the revolutionary community. For Tchen’s goal in such an act of terrorism is to return the revolution to a heightened state of risk, to create an almost religious community out the shared threat of repression; the virile fraternal community can only operate if danger continues to impose itself.

Thus Tchen’s act of pure technique, completely void of ideological fidelity to the communist platform, seems to suggest an attempt at creating a community that can only exist in death. For if Tchen’s first act of violence in the novel is successful (he steals the needed document from his victim), his last is less so: he shoots himself after having been seriously wounded while attempting to blow up Chiang’s car, in reality a decoy vehicle. But just as Tchen understands the objections to terrorism, he also understands its advantage as a tactic with a life extending beyond his own; his disciple, Peï, will gain more attention due to Tchen’s act: “Peï, écrivain, serait écouté parce que lui, Tchen, allait mourir” (*CH*, 683). Tchen’s hope is that his action will mean that Peï’s voice – separated from his throat by writing, as Kyo’s by the

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<sup>47</sup> See Harris’s *André Malraux: A Reassessment*, 89-90.



phonographs – will be able to be heard, that his individual action will have an afterlife.<sup>48</sup> Later in the novel, we learn via Kyo’s widow May that, in fact, Peï has gone to Russia and hopes to return to China as an “agitateur.” Lucien Goldmann interprets this as a sign of Malraux’s belief in the revolution: “Ainsi l’acte même de Tchen et la solitude totale dans laquelle il s’est trouvé rejeté au moment de la mort ont été dépassés et intégrés par l’action historique.”<sup>49</sup> But the novel is less clear about the ideological impact of Peï’s writings: his words inspire in May both the hope that the revolution will continue, and the suspicion that all of his words seem fanatically “intellectual” (756). We read a clipping from an article that Peï has written, but the novel pointedly offers no comment from either the narrator or May. Peï’s voice is heard, perhaps, but it is not necessarily understood. Tchen’s act then seems to express an extreme ambivalence: it manages to further the conditions necessary for a virile community, but only for a community that exists in death. It fulfills its hopes of allowing others’ voices to be heard, but it is incapable of allowing them to be understood.

### **Romains’s Search for a Church**

This question of terrorism is present in *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, but terrorist action is just one of two independent but intersecting intrigues involving secret societies, one centered on the character Jerphanion’s curiosity for Freemasonry (a narrative relegated for the most part to the novel *Recherche d’une église*) and another focused on the character Lauferque’s involvement in a secret group known alternately as l’Organisation or la Secte (whose drama runs across several volumes). Both Jerphanion and Lauferque turn to secret societies out of an initial disgust with contemporary party politics and a desire to connect with their contemporaries, but

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<sup>48</sup> Loubet del Bayle cites this as Malraux’s faith in participatory power of the revolution as “le sentiment de se rattacher à une action qui s’inscrit dans la durée, à un combat qui sera poursuivi après lui, au delà de son éphémère existence.” See his *L’Illusion politique au XXe siècle*, 312.

<sup>49</sup> Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, 125.

their experiences take two distinct paths. Jerphanion's interest in Freemasonry just leads him into a series of conversations: first with Laulerque, then with the militant Rothweil, followed by the engraver and former Mason Ardansseaux, and finally with one of the "highest spiritual authorities" of Masonry, Lengnau. Moving from one authority to another, Jerphanion's quest for knowledge about Freemasonry ultimately ends in deception: during his meeting with Lengnau, the specter of a European war is raised, but the Mason indicates that the Masons will only stand by the side of such an event: "Lengnau fit un singulier sourire et dit en écartant les bras: 'Eh bien...'" (*RE*, I.1191).

Laulerque's path to secret action begins with his own rejection of Freemasonry, explaining that his rejection of the group stems from a desire to act: "C'est le sentiment que je ne serais rien là-dedans, que je n'y ferais rien. Non d'un point de vue de vanité. Mais parce que je veux agir." (*EP*, I.557). The type of group that Laulerque seeks – "une société secrète digne de ce nom" as he repeats again and again – would use kidnappings, assassinations, and theft in order to work towards its goals. Laulerque's dream becomes a reality when he is invited by a mysterious stranger to join l'Organisation while shopping in a bookstore. He quickly learns the principle of the group: that a member enters knowing only the member who invited him, ultimately never learning other participants, or other projects, or its very rules and regulations. Even the group's mission remains vague and free of ideology: "Empêcher la guerre, à l'aide des moyens secrets et directs" (I.1043). If Jerphanion's interactions with Freemasonry only lead to dialogues and never to action, Laulerque's participation in l'Organisation sends him on several missions, including one where he meets another agent, Margaret-Désideria, who will eventually become his mistress; and another under the charge of a mysterious, senior member of the group, Monsieur Karl. The mission with Monsieur Karl represents the most involved drama of

Laulerque's participation in l'Organisation: the two agents inspect a house in the countryside of Les Maures, the point of which Laulerque only learns later is meant to house a kidnapped Austrian politician. Yet the actual intrigue of Laulerque's mission remains continually delayed: his mission with Monsieur Karl is one more of tedium than action, and he ultimately feels betrayed by l'Organisation, resigning in deception.

Jerphanion's flirtation with Freemasonry and Laulerque's participation with l'Organisation both ultimately follow the same narrative arc: unhappy with the inefficiency of party politics, they are initially drawn to the mythology of secret, direct action, only to realize that secret societies cannot stop the oncoming catastrophe of World War I. In this sense Romain dissociates his novel from a theory of the secret society that places it as the motivating force in history. In *Recherche d'une église*, during one of the first conversations between Jerphanion and Laulerque, the narrator makes evident the difficulties implicit in such a vision of history. In this scene, Laulerque expounds on his belief that secret societies are "le nerf de l'histoire," the key to understanding the course of European history from the Church in the Middle Ages to the groundwork necessary for the French Revolution (*RE*, I.1030). As Jerphanion listens to Laulerque, he is suddenly able to see "a new face" of the world,

un monde mené par les sociétés secrètes, machiné par leurs soins, où les événements sont commandés à grande distance, à l'aide de fils dissimulés, dont les trajets, les croisements, y compris les accrochages et embrouillages, ne sauraient être que d'une complication merveilleuse. L'Histoire, dont on ne connaissait jusque-là que la façade officielle, tristement badigeonnée par l'éloquence de plusieurs générations de professeurs, devient passionnante au point qu'on en rêvera la nuit. (*RE*, I.1031)

If official History represents a building's façade that has been whitewashed by professorial eloquence, Laulerque's unofficial version opens up a whole secret architecture. Through Laulerque's own eloquence, History becomes for his listener "une suite de couloirs dérobés, d'escaliers construits à l'intérieur des murs, de fausses cloisons à déclic, de trappes, de cryptes, de galeries souterraines, de tunnels coudés" (ibid.). It becomes, in other words, the various clichéd elements of genre novels, from the gothic to the detective to the spy narrative, what the narrator subsequently refers to as "un tel romanesque." If Laulerque is able to transform History into another world, the scene suggests, that can only come about through a fiction. And, just at the moment when Laulerque is about to carry off his interlocutor, we are brought back to reality:

Mais soudain l'on reprenait conscience d'être dans un café de la place Clichy, vaste, à demi désert, ouvert aux regards des passants nocturnes et aux souffles de la rue; d'être quatre contemporains quelconques perdus dans le Paris de 1910; dans la civilisation uniformément éclairée de l'âge des machines et du suffrage universel. (*RE*, I.1032)

The narrator's shift out of the reverie inspired by Laulerque occasions a return to the specifics of the Parisian scene, with the explicit date representing a movement out of fiction and into present reality. The two descriptors of the modern age – machines and universal suffrage – further delineate the contrast between the vision of a subterranean, secret world and the reality of an enlightened, democratic age. The secret society version of history, it seems, is just another story.

Throughout the scene, the novel describes Jerphanion's point of view as he listens to Laulerque: "Jerphanion s'abandonna donc sans trop de scrupules – il n'interrompait que pour la forme – au ravissement de découvrir un nouveau visage du monde" (*RE*, I.1031). But the auditor of Laulerque's vision of history, the one who imagines the mysterious architecture of the world of secret societies, as well as the one who returns to the scene in Paris, is, more vaguely, "on":

“l’on se dit qu’on va pouvoir s’y promener aussi longtemps qu’on voudra...” (ibid.) and “Mais soudain l’on reprenait conscience...” (RE, I.1032). The shift from Jerphanion to “on” then goes one step further, as the narrator asks a series of rhetorical questions about how the simple architecture of the modern age could hide a “secret conspiracy,” ultimately concluding with another shift in person: “Les rêveries excitées par Lauferque achevaient de vous faire sentir votre impuissance et votre délaissement. Le ‘Nous sommes tellement seuls’ se mettait à clignoter comme une enseigne lumineuse, à courir en lettres de feu au front des immeubles d’en face” (RE, I.1032).<sup>50</sup> The direct address by the *vouvoiement* has the effect of including the reader in what is apparently Jerphanion’s feeling of impotence and disinterest, an effect highlighted by the return to the motto of “nous sommes tellement seuls” at the end of the passage. The technique of shifting perspectives resonates with Romain’s theory of unanimism, a vision of simultaneous experiences shared by a diverse collective.<sup>51</sup> Given the fact that this scene represents the initial moment of Jerphanion’s investigation into Freemasonry, a course that will lead him from intrigue to deception, the *vouvoiement* can also be seen as, in effect, preparing the reader for the narrative to come. The “romanesque” or “rêveries” that a world controlled by secret societies inspires will ultimately be replaced by a return to reality through disappointment.

Yet if a world run by secret societies is ultimately a fiction, a suggestion borne out by their inability to stop World War I, why do they continue to occupy such a central place in

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<sup>50</sup> “Nous sommes tellement seuls” is the name of an article written by their friend and colleague Clanricard, an article that becomes a rallying cry of sorts for the novel’s characters.

<sup>51</sup> Marie-Hélène Boblet-Viart and Dominique Viart situate Romain’s vision of simultaneous experiences within the framework of early-twentieth-century experiments with point of view, fragmentation, and temporal dislocation, seeing unanimism as a contemporary of movements such as cubism or futurism. See their “Esthétiques de la simultanéité,” in *Jules Romain et les écritures de la simultanéité*, 21-43.

Romains's novel, long after this initial conversation?<sup>52</sup> I would suggest that Romains's interest in the secret societies concerns not so much their beliefs or their mythologies of power but instead stems, like Malraux, from the ways that they are defined by their techniques and practices. As is made abundantly clear from the novels, both Freemasonry and l'Organisation remain remarkably void of any ideological substance, expressing only the vaguest notion of the titular good will of Romains's novel. For example, the Masonic authority Lengnau explains to Jerphanion that the "Grand Oeuvre" that defines Masonry can only be expressed as "l'unification totale de l'humanité" (*RE*, I.1187), a sufficiently abstract goal to which is further appended the hope of "l'effacement total de l'injustice" (*RE*, I.1190). Similarly, when Laulerque goes to join l'Organisation, the only discernable goal he can express is "empêcher la guerre, à l'aide de moyens secrets et directs" (*RE*, I.1043). His contact within the group goes so far as to tell him that one can be a member of the Socialist Party, or of Freemasonry, or of any other sort of organization; the only guiding principle is devotion to the methods of l'Organisation.

Freemasonry's vagueness seems in particular to be a recurring theme in the novel, presenting the image of an enigma that can only be talked around. This blurriness is made apparent in one of the first reflections on the organization, in a conversation between Laulerque and his colleague Clanricard in *Eros de Paris*: "Dans les milieux amis qu'il [Clanricard] fréquentait, il n'était parlé de la Franc-Maçonnerie qu'avec une extrême circonspection. Par allusions rapides, auxquelles la conversation ne s'accrochait jamais" (*EP*, I.554). The identity of actual Freemasons (such as their mentor Sampeyre) is questioned but never confirmed: "Il avait entendu dire que Sampeyre était maçon; mais il n'était pas sûr" (*ibid.*). This formula perhaps

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<sup>52</sup> Annie Angremy has shown in her work on the manuscripts of *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* that the myth of the secret society was central in Jules Romains's preoccupations in the earliest stages of the book's preparation. See her *Dossiers préparatoires des Hommes de bonne volonté*, 3 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1982-1987).

best expresses how Freemasonry emerges in the novel: *on a entendu dire..., mais on n'en est pas sûr*.<sup>53</sup>

But if, in Clanricard's opinion, conversations never seem to be able to grasp a clear image of Masonry, the novel ironically only ever describes this secret society through conversations. In contrast to the plot points involving Laulerque's participation in l'Organisation, Freemasonry remains only the subject of dialogues and discussions, as Jerphanion's interest in the secret society is limited to a series of conversations: first with Laulerque, then with the activist Rothweil, followed by the engraver and former Mason Ardansseaux, and finally with one of the "highest spiritual authorities" of Masonry, Lengnau. Since Jerphanion moves from outside commentators to former members to spiritual authorities, the order of conversations gives the impression that the novel is bringing us closer to an authoritative source of knowledge, thus enacting a sort of initiation that will never be fulfilled since Jerphanion never joins Masonry. Instead, what the series of conversations demonstrate is the difficult relationship Freemasonry holds with representation and action. For example, Ardansseaux's critique of the group focuses on its grand narrative, the construction of the temple, and the accompanying rites and rituals that help define it:

Chez eux, tout se rapporte au temple, à la construction du temple. Il n'est question que de truelle, de fil à plomb, d'équerre, ou que de colonne à décorer, et que de temple à toiler, ou que de Frère Couvreur et de Frère Expert. Le jeu consiste en ça. S'arranger pour dire tout ce qu'on a besoin de dire sans quitter le langage de ce métier-là; et en

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<sup>53</sup> Dirck Degraeve notes that in this initial conversation, the participants constantly use qualifiers ("au moins," "à première vue," etc.) in their descriptions to describe Freemasonry, suggesting that even language has a problem discerning the group. See his *La Part du mal: Essai sur l'imaginaire de Jules Romains dans Les Hommes de bonne volonté* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), 85).

même temps combiner des choses à faire ensemble qui aient l’air de se rapporter à ce métier-là, qui continuent le roman. (*RE*, I.1148)

To be a Mason, one must adopt the language and rituals of the secret society, what Ardansseaux calls a continued writing of the novel of Freemasonry. Their rites and images are meant to have some intellectual heft: “c’est symbolique, oui, ce sont des symboles,” Ardansseaux later says, “ça représente des idées” (*RE*, I.1149). The practice of initiation into the secret society therefore appears entirely problematic: by being initiated into Masonry, one could suppose that the value of such symbols comes to have meaning, that the symbols are a means to translate ideas into action. But at the same time, the insistence on language’s importance, rather than on action, indicates the organization’s lack of influence. The watchwords and symbols are invoked not to bring ideas into existence but rather to refer back to themselves, to continue the narrative of Freemasonry, a narrative that (as Ardansseaux repeatedly claims) is nothing but a game.<sup>54</sup>

Lengnau’s conversation with Jerphanion turns on a similar question of language, but the novel’s authority on Masonry insists that the rites have a communal value equivalent to that of the Church’s mass. In describing the possibly risible aspects of the secret society, Lengnau focuses primarily on the linguistic or representative elements: “toutes les particularités de langage, les formules employées, les noms de grades, les décorations des salles, ainsi de suite.” But according to Lengnau, the point of these symbolic forms is the creation of “une espèce de drame religieux...et c’est le drame de la Construction, comme la messe est le drame du Sacrifice” (*RE*, I.1184). For Lengnau, a Church can only be defined as the collective symbolic representation of mystery. Ardansseaux was correct, then, when he argued that the repetition of

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<sup>54</sup> In his *Part du mal*, Dirck Degraeve notes how on multiple occasions Ardansseaux compares Masons to children playing at games, using this comparison to advance an argument that Freemasonry as an organization remains at a retarded developmental stage. By taking pleasure in playing with words, Freemasonry remains (in Degraeve’s analysis) “foncièrement régressive, infantilissante.” See *La Part du mal*, 89-90.



the rituals of Masonry was one of its key elements; what he failed to comprehend, following Lengnau's logic, is that repetition confers a spiritual value, uniting the participants through shared gestures. As he later puts it, masonic rites "ne se contentent pas de représenter symboliquement la Construction du Temple. On peut y voir encore une sorte de technique de l'unité mystique" (*RE*, I.1187). The metaphorical construction of the temple becomes, through its repeated practice, a technique for unity for its practitioners: through their shared practice, their rituals create their own unity. This presents a difficulty for those who are not initiated into Freemasonry, as the rites and rituals only have meaning for those who undertake them.<sup>55</sup> The reader's hesitation in ultimately choosing between Ardansseaux's version of Masonry and Lengnau's ultimately confirms Lengnau's insistence on techniques of unity as necessary for understanding. Full comprehension can only come through the shared practice of Masonic rituals, but the novel's competing viewpoints and refusal to portray such practices means that a synthesis of understanding will never be arrived at.

If the value of Masonry is to be located for Romans in the common practices of its members, Laulerque's ideal secret society is located instead in the politics of direct action. In a discussion in *Eros de Paris*, he proposes an alternate history in which both Napoleon III and Bismarck had been secretly assassinated in July 1870, thereby preventing the Franco-Prussian War. His version of a conspiracy entails a group of trained technicians who are able to destabilize the state and take control of the government, recalling in many ways the vision outlined by Malaparte: "Des hommes bien placés, qui exécuteraient des consignes, sans même savoir nécessairement à quel plan d'ensemble elles répondent... En un mot, l'action de masse achevant de désorienter un gouvernement *déjà frappé à la tête*" (*EP*, I.553, italics in original).

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<sup>55</sup> As Dirck Degraeve notes, "ce langage symbolique est totalement hermétique vu du dehors, le symbolisme en étant obscur, latent, inconscient pourrait-on dire." *La Part du mal*, 92.

For Laulerque, the value of a secret society cannot reside in its idea or a plan, since not all of the members know what they are participating in. Instead its value is to be found in precise, direct action, an action that he refers to as “terrorisme confidentiel”: “l’idéal pour une organisation secrète...c’est que ses opérations soient aussi silencieuses que possible” (*EP*, I.552). This terrorism is not the spectacular scenes of violence as practice by anarchists, but rather an effective action that leaves no trace.<sup>56</sup>

But the profound value of such an organization comes from the ways in which these techniques are able to forge bonds of intimacy between its members. When Laulerque is invited to join l’Organisation, he learns that the principle of secrecy that governs the group demands that a new member know only the identity of agent who admitted him, and only meet other members when a mission calls for it: “Il restait toujours dans l’ignorance quant à l’ensemble de l’organisation, à son centre réel, à ses rouages, aux gens qui en faisaient partie” (*RE*, I.1038). Against the Masonic ideal of group enclosure, the Organisation presents a series of close but separate intimacies: the lack of familiarity with other members means that an agent is bound to his sponsor through shared trust, a link each sponsor logically shares with his own sponsor. As Laulerque describes it, “c’est une idée grande, extraordinairement émouvante. Et d’une vérité qui va loin dans l’homme. L’idée qu’une chaîne de confiance, de fidélité, peut se créer anneau par anneau” (*RE*, I.1042). This image of a “chaîne de confiance” represents in many ways the way that both secret societies function in the novel: Jerphanion meets Laulerque, who introduces him to Ardansseaux and to Rothweil, who introduces him to Legnau, just as Laulerque moves from the agent in the bookstore to Margaret-Désideria to Monsieur Karl. By representing this

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<sup>56</sup> On the representation of anarchists in early twentieth-century French literature, see Maurice Rieuneau’s *Guerre et révolution dans le roman français de 1919 à 1939* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 2000).

chain of trust and solidarity, the novel reproduces at a narrative level the point of the secret society, to create intimate connections that lift the individual out of a solitary existence.

Through the appropriation of such a technique, Romain effectively responds to the traditional novel's portrayal of society, namely its reliance on coincidental encounters. Due to the fact that, since Balzac, the novel has been, in Romain's opinion, too centered on the individual hero, the novelist is forced to invent implausible ways for other characters to intersect: "Que de fois, par exemple, n'ai-je pas souri... en voyant, dans un récit qui prétendait me représenter la vie de Paris ou de Londres, cinq ou six personnages, toujours les mêmes, se retrouver par hasard dans les lieux les plus divers" (I.8). Instead of allowing for true moments of spontaneous meetings to occur, the traditional novel has to shoehorn all actions and encounters through its central character. This technique is, Romain admits, a novelistic convention, but its artificiality may well create suspicion on the part of the reader, the doubt that society has been represented as promised. At the same time, the depiction of what Romain calls "une diversité de destinées individuelles qui y cheminent chacune pour leur compte" (I.9) demands a certain organizing principle, a discipline that allows these individual destinies to at times come into contact with each other. The narrative chain of confidence creates such a believable form of organization, suggesting that the trust implicit in the meeting between L'aulerque and his sponsor, or between L'aulerque and Monsieur Karl, is ultimately transferred to the relationship between Romain and his reader.

Despite the practical and aesthetic advantages that l'Organisation's techniques provides, the problem with such a group is that its principle of utmost secrecy risks preventing the very unified action it hopes to create. As L'aulerque argues, the most effective terrorism is a "confidential" terrorism, one that completely passes unremarked, falling under the absolute

silence of the secret society: the assassination of a politician taken as a heart attack. But if the ideal secret society operates under a rule of total silent trust, and if the true act of terrorism leaves no trace, how is a member of the group to perceive the fruits of his actions? If the mastery of terrorism as a technique is marked only by silence and secrecy, how can one ever be sure that it occurred? This paradox is, I would argue, Romans's way of suggesting the limits of secret political action because it puts into question the efficiency of the group: a "confidential terrorism" that leaves no mark only sows confusion among the members. This difficulty becomes apparent when Laulerque goes on his mission with Monsieur Karl to scout a country house intended to hide a kidnapped Austrian politician. But Laulerque only later deduces the point of the mission, and his frustration prompts the following observation from Monsieur Karl:

Le danger des organisations ouvertes et libres... c'est que, chacun venant y discourir comme il lui plaît, la discussion renaît sans cesse, et l'on ne passe jamais aux actes. Le danger des organisations secrètes et autoritaires, c'est que, tout le monde se taisant, chacun risque de penser dans une direction, sans s'apercevoir que les autres pensent dans une autre direction. Et le jour où l'on passe aux actes, il se trouve que certains ont préparé autre chose que ce qu'ils voulaient. (*MP*, II.291)

The tension between endless speech and direct action – the conflict between liberal democracy and the secret society – is further complicated by the third term of silence: without the assurance of a unity of purpose, the goal of the mission can be put into doubt. In other words, it represents the flip side of Freemasonry's imperfections: while Masonic ideals can only be fully understood by their shared practice, the execution of l'Organisation's techniques insures that their ideals might never be perceived, much less understood. In this sense, Romans investigates both Masonry and terrorism in order to demonstrate how the techniques of secret societies always

function in ambivalent ways to the extent that the same actions that provide solidarity precluding a total, unified understanding. As Gianfranco Rubino notes in his analysis of the forms of the secret in *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, at its etymological root, “secrecy” (*secenere*) means “to set apart.”<sup>57</sup> And as the novel seems to demonstrate, this act of separation is not only a challenge to democracy’s ideal of openness but to the fraternal vision of a communal whole.

### **Coda: Terrorist Techniques**

Throughout this chapter I have insisted on a reading of technique at the expense of ideology in order to demonstrate that the value of the conspiratorial organization for both Malraux and Romain Rolland lies in the ways that such groups provide techniques for shaping a fraternal community, one shaped by a virile common purpose and a belief in the efficacy of direct action. Against the image of the secret society as an exterior source of fear or paranoia, Romain Rolland and Malraux treat it as a legitimate if complicated means of organization, an alternative to liberal democracy’s individualism and the interwar period’s valorization of the masses. The conspiracy thus functions as a means of finding a middle term between the individual and society. Following such a model entails for both Malraux and Romain Rolland a shift in the novel, a move toward an aesthetic approach that, in order to convincingly and effectively reproduce a collective character, must appropriate certain hallmarks of the conspiracy, including its efficiency, discipline, and organization. In this way of valorizing method as separate from ideology, both Romain Rolland and Malraux seem to find a value in the secret society in ways that Curzio Malaparte might appreciate, a celebration of the technical achievements of a group of men ready to do whatever necessary.

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<sup>57</sup> Gianfranco Rubino, “Thématique et mécanique du secret chez Jules Romain,” in *Jules Romain et les écritures de la simultanéité*, Dominique Viart, ed. (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1996), 145.

While their novels clearly demonstrate an appeal to the secret society based on conspiratorial techniques and practices, we cannot say for sure if Malraux and Romains's were in fact influenced by Malaparte's *Technique du coup d'État*. But it is certain that one other imposing figure of French literature had: Maurice Blanchot, who, in a fortuitous coincidence, published a review of *Technique* as one of his earliest articles as literary editor at *Journal des débats* in August of 1931. As a concluding remark to this chapter, I'd like to use Blanchot's article as a means of examining the historical and literary afterlives of the notion of the primacy of technique. For in his review of *Technique*, Blanchot expressed a healthy dose of final skepticism at Malaparte's ultimate conclusion: "Un coup d'Etat n'est pas seulement un coup de force, comme semble le croire M. Malaparte, encore moins un simple complot; il ne s'organise, ne réussit et ne dure qu'avec le consentement d'un certain nombre, la crainte ou l'indifférence du reste."<sup>58</sup> For Blanchot, Malaparte's insistence on technique does not tell the full story: a putsch, in order to endure, needs the participation of others, be it by consent, fear, or indifference. It requires, in other words, what Blanchot terms a "revolutionary situation," a sense of crisis that manages to evoke feelings of dissatisfaction and fear on the part of the populace. The political context not only must be considered, it is a necessity: "[L'insurrection] est une machine, mais que met en branle toute une politique." Thus, Blanchot concludes, the surest way to guarantee those critical conditions is not through a successful coup, but instead through failed politics: "Plus qu'une habile technique, la mauvaise politique des gouvernements sert la révolution."

As critics have now well established, by 1936 that "revolutionary situation" had, for Blanchot, arrived. In a number of editorials published in *Combat* and *L'Insurgé*, Blanchot called for a national revolution that would wipe out the Popular Front government of Leon Blum, using

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<sup>58</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Comment s'emparer du pouvoir?," *Journal des débats*, 18 August 1931, p. 1.

a discourse of violence and severity that at times brushed up against anti-Semitism.<sup>59</sup> For example, in one of those most infamous articles, 1936's "Le Terrorisme: méthode de salut public," Blanchot calls for terrorism as a justifiable method to put into action a reversal of fortune for those in power. In other words, by 1936, the situation of fear and dissatisfaction that Blanchot states in 1931 is a prerequisite for a revolution has not only arrived, it must also be turned against the government: "Il est bon, il est beau que ces gens qui croient avoir tout pouvoir, qui usent à leur gré de la justice, des lois, qui semblent vraiment maîtres du beau sang français éprouvent soudain leurs faiblesses et soient rappelés par la peur à la raison."<sup>60</sup> For Romans and Malraux, terrorism seemed to be posed – in different but corresponding ways – as the outer limit of the techniques of the conspiracy, perhaps effective in its modes of attacks but largely ineffective for the goal of communication: Laulerque's ideal of silent terrorism only breeds doubts about the purpose of the community, and Tchen's suicide bomb attack fails to insure that his disciple's message will be understood. But for Blanchot in 1936, terrorism, what he calls "une méthode d'action," becomes the sole and necessary technique to be employed to put into place a revolutionary politics of terror, the fear necessary for revolution. Blanchot asserts that this method must be adopted by a group, namely the opposition to the Popular Front, what Blanchot calls the "oeuvre de quelques-uns et de quelques équipes," who may have "idées fortes et justes" but need a politics of action to communicate those ideas. And such a call to put into action terrorist techniques eventually found its response in the form of La Cagoule, the extreme-right terrorist secret society that advanced an anti-Semitic, anti-communist, and anti-Masonic

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<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman was one of the first to reveal Blanchot's wartime journalism. See his "Blanchot at *Combat*: Of Literature and Terror," in *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983), as well as his "Iphegenia 38: Deconstruction, History, and the Case of *L'Arrêt de mort*," in *Genealogies of the Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>60</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Le Terrorisme: Méthode de salut public," *Combat*, n. 7 (July 1936), p. 1. Reprinted in *Gramma*, n.5 (1976), p. 61-63.

platform of violence, terrorizing Popular Front France through a series of bombings and assassinations. And, in a further historical twist, La Cagoule's most audacious attack, the 1936-1937 failed attempt at a parliamentary coup against Leon Blum's government, only came about after a studious analysis of Malaparte's *Technique du coup d'Etat*.<sup>61</sup> So it would seem that, in 1936 at least, technique cannot be totally forgotten in revolutionary politics.

The revelation of Blanchot's prewar journalism by Jeffrey Mehlman and others in the early 1980s has generated much debate over its lingering influence in Blanchot's postwar literary thought, particularly with regard to deconstruction.<sup>62</sup> It is not my intent to rehash those debates here in such a short space, especially since the early review of Malaparte does not seem to suggest the radically dissident positions that Blanchot would eventually adopt in his most incendiary articles in 1936 and 1937. But I would like to underline as a final observation the ways in which the separation between technique and ideology that Malaparte asserts in politics manages to circle back around in literature, slightly modified, via Blanchot.

The occasion is provided by yet another review penned by Blanchot, this time of Jean Paulhan's 1941 theoretical text, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la Terreur dans les lettres*.<sup>63</sup> Paulhan's book, a reworking of articles he had published in the *Nouvelle revue française* several years prior, famously poses literature as a tension between the competing notions of Terror and Rhetoric. Terrorists in literature are those authors and critics who denigrate words and language in favor of ideas, and stand in opposition to rhetoricians, writers who follow traditional rules of

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<sup>61</sup> On the Cagoule's study of Malaparte, see J.R. Tournoux, *L'Histoire secrète* (Paris: Plon, 1973); and Monier's *Complot dans la République*. For a good history of the Cagoule, see Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Métro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> For an overview of the "Blanchot Affair," see Stephen Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995).

<sup>63</sup> Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la Terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).



genre and form. The use of “Terror” as a descriptor for this tendency in literature has its historical resonances: the allusion to the violent Reign of Terror of the French Revolution marks the moment in literature when writers abandoned classicism in favor of Romanticism, moving from accepted forms to original expression. This form of literary terrorism translates into a distrust of language – what Paulhan refers to as “misologie” – stemming from the fear that words only distort thought, perceived as some sort of purity and authenticity that can only be attained through the systematic suppression of literary commonplaces and clichés. As Paulhan argues, this hatred of words creates a certain paradox among literary terrorists, since they are constantly preoccupied with words, devoting much of their effort to eliminating any traces of commonplaces in order to arrive at this mythical, authentic expression. At a fundamental level, Terror in letters represents, as Michael Syrotinski puts it, “the precedence of thought over language”; and terrorists in literature should thus be understood not as technicians but as ideologues, authors who constantly attempt to suppress all signs of technique.<sup>64</sup> Against this purge, Paulhan proposes a return to Rhetoric, an acceptance of the use of commonplaces as a means of expressing thought. For commonplaces are, as Paulhan admits, fundamentally ambiguous: they represent the most impoverished form of language, yet their very commonness means that they allow for the possibility of authentic, uncorrupted communication. Accepted literary technique becomes, then, the way to stave off the feeling of anxiety and apprehension occasioned by a terrorist approach to literature.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Syrotinski, “How Is Literature Possible?”, in *A New History of French Literature*, Denis Hollier, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 955.

<sup>65</sup> As Syrotinski summarizes, “the author is freed from a constant preoccupation with language precisely by submitting to the authority of commonplaces.” “How Is Literature Possible?”, 956.

Blanchot's reading of Paulhan's text, published in three articles in the fall of 1941 in *Journal des débats* and collected in a 1942 pamphlet entitled *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?*, turns precisely on Paulhan's concluding call for a return to rhetoric. It is possible, Blanchot suggests, to read Paulhan's work at a face value, to appreciate it as a call for a new sort of classicism against Terror's "méfiance absolue à l'égard de la technique, des genres bien définis, et généralement des règles."<sup>66</sup> But such a reading would ignore the "étranges sentiments" that Paulhan's book awakens in its reader, the anxiety ("angoisse") and fear ("épouvante") that its argument carries out, the disturbing impression that *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* hides another, secret book. For in insisting on the return to rhetoric as means of communicating authentic thought, Paulhan seems to admit the paradoxical triumph of the terrorist position.<sup>67</sup> This difficulty is, for Blanchot, due to the fact that, far from being just an approach to or an idea about literature, Terror is actually literature itself, and any attempt to dispel Terror means to question the very possibility of literature: "Lorsque nous mettons en cause la Terreur, la réfutant ou montrant les effrayantes conséquences de sa logique, c'est la littérature même que nous questionnons et poussons au néant."<sup>68</sup> Literature exists, Blanchot writes, only when writers submit literature to its opposite, placing thought in the service of language, making Terror serve Rhetoric. The possibility of literature is thus to be found only in its impossibility.

For Blanchot, the anxiety that comes from reading Paulhan's text comes out of his style, for the apparent simplicity of Paulhan's writing, the plainness of his technique, seems to be a

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<sup>66</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "La Terreur dans les lettres," *Journal des débats* (21 October 1941), 3. This article forms the first part of the José Corti pamphlet edition of *Comment la littérature est-elle possible?* (Paris: José Corti, 1942), but does not figure in Blanchot's reworking of his essay for the collection *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

<sup>67</sup> As Stephen Ungar puts it, "when Paulhan wrote about rediscovering a 'nouveau vierge,' his assertion of a privileged origin extended the very terrorist attitude he had earlier sought to overcome." *Scandal and Aftereffect*, 120.

<sup>68</sup> Blanchot, "Comment la littérature est-elle possible?," *Journal des débats*, 25 November 1941, 3.

trap: “On pénètre sans prendre garde dans les analyses qu’il construit, ne sentant point vers quels périls se hâtent les phrases délicieuses et distinctes dont la liaison serrée est une garantie de sécurité de d’ordre.” The finely constructed style of Paulhan’s simple, direct prose seems to suggest security and order. But in reality, it conceals the return of Terror that Paulhan’s argument seems to tend toward, even as he calls for a return to Rhetoric, a secret that Paulhan’s style, structure, and organization – his very technique, in other words – all seem to mask: “Y aurait-il caché dans ses réfutations et ses arguments une sorte de machine infernale qui, invisible aujourd’hui, éclatera un jour bouleversant les lettres et en rendant l’usage impossible?”<sup>69</sup> Paulhan’s text then plays out the very ambiguity its argument seems to suggest, its limpidity suggesting a profound indecipherability, its technique concealing the hidden Terror of literature.<sup>70</sup> It is like Laulerque’s definition of “confidential terrorism” transferred to literature, a technique whose efficiency depends on its silence. The danger of Paulhan’s text is, Blanchot asserts, this destabilizing technique of secrecy, one that conceals an “infernal machine” that defines literature only through its impossibility. And it is this machine, the idea of literature conceived through its extreme negation, that will become the defining characteristic of Blanchot’s literary thought in the postwar era.

So to circle back around one final time: in 1931, Blanchot, quoting Trotsky, compares Malaparte’s techniques of insurrection to a “machine,” but a machine that is insufficient in the ultimate goal of overthrowing a government, a machine in need of a revolutionary situation of fear and discontent. In revolutionary politics, ideology, and specifically an ideology that feeds

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Jeffrey Mehlman proposes that this “infernal machine” represents a deconstructive method of reading, a tradition he sees Blanchot as inaugurating here.

<sup>70</sup> Paulhan himself would make that connection apparent in the title of his 1946 essay “La Rhétorique était une société secrète.” For an analysis of the “undecidable” nature of *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, see Michael Syrotinksi’s *Defying Gravity: Jean Paulhan’s Interventions in Twentieth-Century French Intellectual History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 87-93.

on and profits from anxiety, is more fundamental than technique alone. In 1936, the insurrectional technique of terror, what Blanchot calls a “method of public safety,” becomes the necessary and essential means of installing a regime of terror, a case of a technique imposing its own ideology. In politics, at least, technique becomes more essential, able to prolong and intensify the fear in a revolutionary situation. And when this question resurfaces in literature in 1941, terror has ceased to be a technique but has instead become its own “infernal machine,” the radical idea hidden by Paulhan’s own literary techniques, the questioning of literature’s own possibility. It is a questioning that originates in the fear and anxiety that the secret nature of these texts seems to provoke, producing a virtual revolutionary situation in the mind of the critic. Technique, that which is deemed insufficient for a revolution in politics in 1931, has thus become the very mark of efficiency for the revolution in literature that overtakes Blanchot in 1941.

## Chapter 5

### The Secret Society and Its Enemies: Aragon, Nizan, and Communist Writing in the 1930s

In “C’est là que tout a commencé...”, the 1964 preface written for the republication of his 1934 novel *Les Cloches de Bâle*, Aragon presents the story of the book’s composition as one of a route detoured. In this anecdote, Aragon had finished the first portion of the novel, “Diane,” a portrait of the moral corruption of the Parisian bourgeoisie, before handing it off to his companion Elsa Triolet for her reaction. Her disdainful response – “Et tu vas continuer longtemps comme ça?” – proved to be decisive: Triolet’s displeasure when confronted with the novel’s seeming fascination with the customs of the bourgeoisie effectively put an end to the planned scope of *Les Cloches de Bâle*, and a new novel focused on the workers’ movement began to take shape.<sup>1</sup> From Aragon’s repeated insistence on this story’s importance (the *là* in “C’est là que tout a commencé...”), one might be led to believe that an insurmountable chasm separates the beginning of *Les Cloches de Bâle* from what follows, a fictional scission between the limited view of “Diane” and the international political and economic panorama of the novel’s other sections. Yet Aragon himself soon belies this interpretation by suggesting that it was the last scene of “Diane” – indeed, the last line – that provided the momentum for the following narrative. According to Aragon, this “phrase au hasard,” an invitation made by the industrialist Wisner to the financier Georges Brunel to collaborate with the police (“Ou encore...si tu voulais entrer dans la police?”), created the justification for the novel-to-come. In Aragon’s retrospective version, then, the origins of *Les Cloches de Bâle* are to be located not only in a newfound consciousness of the workers’ movement, but also under the shadow of suspicion and police plots.

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<sup>1</sup> Aragon, “C’est là que tout a commencé...,” in *Oeuvres romanesques complètes I*, ed. Daniel Bournoux and Philippe Forest (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 697.

The centrality of the conspiracy to the novel's logic leads Aragon in 1964 to make judgments both literary (it's only "natural," he claims, that Balzac's *Comédie humaine* gives way to the *Histoire des Treize*) and historical ("A tout prendre, le XXe siècle est beaucoup plus secret que le XIXe").<sup>2</sup> This vision of secrecy proved so compelling that Aragon returns to it in another retrospective text, 1965's "La Suite dans les idées," the preface to the novel that followed *Les Cloches de Bâle, Les Beaux Quartiers*. In this essay, Aragon alludes to what he terms the "rivalités de clan" within the police in order to propose a portrait of the interwar period dominated by shadowy internecine struggles: history is made from behind the scenes, in secret struggles both against and with the police.<sup>3</sup> From these comments, it would seem that, for Aragon (or at least the Aragon of the mid-1960s), the secret is a determining factor in the history of the twentieth century, and more specifically in the development of the communist novel in the 1930s. One should, of course, be wary of blindly and wholeheartedly accepting an author's retrospective stories of origin and justification. Yet given the fact that these essays from the 1960s represent Aragon's attempt at explaining his move away from surrealism towards both communism and its aesthetic of socialist realist fiction, a break consolidated by *Les Cloches de Bâle*, the question is certainly raised as to the relationship between conspiracies and communist literature in the 1930s.

As early as 1938, Jean-Paul Sartre had used the figure of the conspiracy to address the question of the very possibility of a communist novelist. In his review of Paul Nizan's *La Conspiration*, Sartre asserts that the novel's characters are almost unbelievable as independent figures in a novel; the bourgeois youth that form the book's eponymous conspiracy are given as

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<sup>2</sup> Aragon, "C'est là que tout a commencé," 705.

<sup>3</sup> Aragon, "La Suite dans les idées," *Oeuvres romanesques II*, ed. Daniel Bournoux and Raphaël Lafhail-Molino) (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 41.

mere expressions of their class and status, rather than dramatic actors. From this observation Sartre poses the following conundrum: “Un communiste peut-il écrire un roman? Je n’en suis pas persuadé: il n’a pas le droit de se faire le complice de ses personnages.”<sup>4</sup> Sartre suggests that a communist novelist’s understanding of history as fundamentally one of the class struggle of the proletariat necessarily deprives his characters of their individual liberty: they are only useful as illustrations of a predetermined narrative. But in a nod to the conspiratorial subject of the novel that he is reviewing, Sartre asserts that the correct relationship between the author and his subject is one of complicity: a good writer is one who is an accomplice to his creations, something a communist writer cannot do.<sup>5</sup> For Sartre, then, the problem with the communist novelist is that he is not enough of a coconspirator with his characters; he imposes a narrative on them, one oriented by his belief in his understanding of the unfolding of history.

This chapter pursues the relationship of communist writing to conspiracies by examining the particularities of the representations of secret plots in Aragon’s *Les Cloches de Bâle* and *Les Beaux Quartiers* and Nizan’s *La Conspiration*.<sup>6</sup> The three novels each portray a wide variety of conspiracies, from industrial cabals and police plots to anarchist groups and communist cells, while advancing a similar ideological point of view, one that advocates for the pursuit and triumph of the socialist revolution. I analyze these two authors in conjunction because they serve as perhaps the most exemplary and accomplished communist writers in France in the interwar

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “*La Conspiration* par Paul Nizan,” *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 29. Essay originally published in August 1938.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick McCarthy notes that Sartre’s reading neglects the shifting points of view that the novels puts into play, creating an erroneous image of Nizan as a doctrinaire communist. I will return to this question of point of view later in this chapter. See McCarthy’s “Sartre, Nizan, and the Dilemmas of Political Commitment,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 68 (1985): 191-205.

<sup>6</sup> Aragon, *Les Cloches de Bâle*, in *Oeuvres romanesques I*, and *Les Beaux Quartiers*, in *Oeuvres romanesques II*; and Paul Nizan, *La Conspiration* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). References to these texts will be given parenthetically with the abbreviations, *CB*, *BQ*, and *C*, respectively.

period. Aragon's famous rupture with his former colleagues and friends of the surrealist movement was marked by his decision to join the Communist Party and adopt its aesthetic platform of socialist realism. His particularly strident commitment to the Party led him to contribute to the communist newspaper *L'Humanité* and to head the Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires, editing its journal, *Commune*. He represents, in the words of one critic, the "archetype of the communist writer."<sup>7</sup> For his part, Nizan's decision to join the Communist Party in 1928 stands as a similar watershed moment; Sartre, in his 1960 introduction to Nizan's *Aden Arabie* (1931), cites this choice as one of the determining episodes of their friendship. An active participant in communist politics at a time when the Party was in a moribund state in France, Nizan's status as a militant writer often seems to inspire political hyperbole on the part of his critics: one of his biographers calls him a "fanatic" of communism.<sup>8</sup> Like Aragon, Nizan was a prolific journalist and critic, writing for a wide variety of newspapers and journals. These nonfictional contributions from Nizan and Aragon also help justify my dual focus on their work, for, as we shall see, both authors helped define the particular form and content of communist literature in the interwar period. From Nizan's early essays on revolutionary literature to Aragon's calls for a French school of socialist realism, both were preoccupied not only with writing literature but with explaining its potential for furthering the goal of the communist revolution.

Part of the mission of literature for both Aragon and Nizan is to articulate a genealogy of the problems of 1930s France, to narrate a pre-history in order to better understand the present moment. Accordingly, their novels take place amid the tumult of the recent past: *Les Cloches de Bâle* and *Les Beaux Quartiers* depict the social conflicts and political fissures in the years

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *L'Illusion politique au XXe siècle* (Paris: Economica, 1999), 142.

<sup>8</sup> Pascal Ory, *Nizan: Destin d'un révolté* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 2005), 97.



immediately preceding World War I, while *La Conspiration* describes a group of young militants and intellectuals coming of age at the end of the 1920s. In this sense, they both are part of what Mary Jean Green has identified as a widespread understanding among writers in the 1930s who saw the present moment as history in the making, who used fiction to make sense of “the historical chaos of their decade.”<sup>9</sup> The particularity of Aragon and Nizan is that this investigation of history often takes the shape of a double-edged critique of a conspiratorial model of politics. On the one hand, the revolutionary conspiracy is often posed – either by the author or by the characters themselves – in opposition to a larger conspiracy associated with capitalism and the institutions that perpetuate and support its regime: the police, the military, political parties, and the bourgeois family unit. What emerges from this perception of a vast conspiracy is a sense of history organized by and on behalf of institutions intent on maintaining their power, Richard Hofstadter’s notion of a “paranoid style of politics.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the critique of conspiracy is not only directed at capitalism, but also at the revolutionary appropriation of the secret society model of resistance. These novels fundamentally reject the conspiratorial tendencies of communism, insisting that such tactics only maintain and embolden the capitalist regime. Through repetitions and variations on this theme, the texts stress a problematic logic of the revolutionary plot whereby secrets only beget more secrets, and conspiracies only lead to more conspiracies.

I address this critique of the conspiratorial model of politics by situating both Aragon and Nizan in the context of communist politics and writing in the interwar period. The novels’ criticisms testify to a historical shift from the Communist Party’s program of clandestine politics

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Jean Green, *Fiction in the Historical Present: French Writers and the Thirties* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

in the 1920s toward its participation after 1934 in the Popular Front, a movement for which the public display of the unified masses represented a powerful political goal. Aragon's novels in particular come out of the first spirit of unity that motivated the creation of the Popular Front, posing the conspiracy as a fictional negative pole that contrasts with the valorized representation of the masses. *La Conspiration*, while continuing the critique of conspiracies, demonstrates considerably more ambivalence toward political movements, representing how the fervor of the Popular Front had by the end of the 1930s transformed into deception and uncertainty. I further argue that the criticism of the secret society model of politics has an intellectual message, one associated with a rejection of conceptions of literature, such as the ivory tower or the avant-garde, which are based on a closed circle, an isolation of the writer from the public. In both Aragon's advocacy for socialist realism and the Nizan's call for revolutionary literature, the authors stress the importance of an illuminating function for literature, one that represents reality without the concealing veils of the bourgeoisie. Thus the revelation of the conspiracy within these texts attempts to function both politically and intellectually in a very literal manner, one whose literalness is precisely the point: the representation of fictional conspiracies demonstrates how the writer reveals the concealing and subversive elements of bourgeois society, showing that the true purpose of the communist writer is to lay bare the machinations of capitalism. However, I will argue that the paranoid style of narration implied by a conspiratorial worldview has as its ultimate result a distorting effect on the novelist's goal of clarity and openness. Although serving as an attempt at linking the author to the masses, the conspiratorial framework only creates division and distortion of the goal of socialist realist fiction.

### Conspiratorial Critiques

In 1964, while looking back at the moment at which he began to write the books that would become the *Cycle du Monde réel*, Aragon mused that it was as if realism had “demanded its rights” against surrealism, a demand that necessitated a turn towards the novel. For Aragon, realism calls for the novel since “tout roman fait appel à la croyance du monde tel qu’il est, même pour s’y opposer.”<sup>11</sup> However, the “world as it is” that Aragon sought to portray was not directly France in the 1930s; rather, the *Monde réel* novels take as their subject the France of the period immediately preceding World War I. The plot of *Les Cloches de Bâle* extends for the most part from 1911 to 1912 and is divided into four main parts, each bearing a central character’s name: “Diane,” which focuses on the story of a bourgeois wife of an industrialist and their circle; “Catherine” and “Victor,” which relate the story between Catherine Simonidzé, a bourgeois Georgian immigrant to France who becomes disillusioned with her class, and Victor Dehaynin, the taxi driver through whom she becomes involved in the workers’ movement; and “Clara,” an epilogue taking place at the 1912 Basel peace conference. The novel’s successor, *Les Beaux Quartiers*, offers a more focused and classically realist narrative, centered on two brothers from a small provincial town who both come to Paris to pursue two radically different paths: Edmond Barbentane, the older, follows his career as a doctor and becomes more and more implicated in the corruption of the bourgeoisie, while Armand Barbentane breaks with his family and class to join with the workers’ movement. These novels represent, then, two rather different ways of apprehending reality; Aragon himself noted how the realization of the lack of

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<sup>11</sup> Aragon, “C’est là que tout a commencé,” 691.

construction in the sprawling and international narrative of *Les Cloches de Bâle* led to the more focused story of *Les Beaux Quartiers*.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the divergent natures of the two novels, they both serve Aragon's primary goal: an analysis of the pre-history of Aragon's present, an attempt at explaining the causes and justifications for the 1914 war to a public firmly rooted in the anxieties of 1930s Europe. This sense of historical causality, explaining one era by returning to another, creates a narrative framework within which conspiracies become essential mechanisms and unifying characteristics of the novels. Secret plots, most often involving collusion between the worlds of finance and the police, are tied to major narrative points in both novels, from personal tragedies (the suicide of Pierre de Sabran in "Diane" and the entire narrative of the Passage-Club in *Les Beaux Quartiers*) to political events (the anarchist movement in "Catherine" and the taxi strike in "Victor"). From the very start, history in Aragon's novels is seen to be the product of a capitalist conspiracy: in the conversation between the financiers Brunel and Wisner at the end of "Diane" in *Les Cloches de Bâle* – the scene that Aragon would later claim had provided the narrative propulsion for the rest of the novel – the 1911 Moroccan crisis, involving internal tensions between France and Germany's respective claims to Morocco as a colony, is posed as the work of an industrial cabal. As Wisner puts it to his friend, "Comprends bien, mon petit, qu'à cette heure je n'ai pas trop de toutes mes disponibilités pour soutenir l'œuvre admirable que la France entreprend au Maroc... [...] Quand je dis *la France*, c'est une façon très simple, pour dire *nous*, un certain groupe d'intérêts communs" (CB, 779). Wisner suggests that the nation itself has been replaced by a selective group of interests, a personalized group motivated by profit rather than any ideal of patriotism. The tone of Wisner's speech quickly turns to one of malevolence, with the rest of the civilization powerless to resist the plans of the group: "On ne nous empêchera pas de poursuivre

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<sup>12</sup> Aragon, "La Suite dans les idées," 13.

notre œuvre de civilisation. Et s'il faut faire la guerre..." (CB, 780, ellipses in the original). War, then, appears as an inevitable event, one that is prepared, planned, and even welcomed by the novel's capitalist characters.

This conspiratorial vision of the complex entanglement of economic interests and state functions, with the political world being controlled behind the scenes by financiers who hold the true power, is one that is repeated throughout Aragon's two novels. Wisner's colleague Brunel resurfaces later in *Les Cloches de Bâle*, spying on Jean Jaurès at the 1912 Peace Congress at Basel from which the novel takes its name, reporting back to his capitalist superiors. The main historical drama of *Les Beaux Quartiers*, a taxi drivers' strike, is first addressed through a meeting of financial leaders consisting of members of the automobilist consortium led by the financier Joseph Quesnel. Essentially an economic monopoly targeting the taxi drivers' union, the group is referred to by the narrator as "une douzaine de personnes tassées autour de la table" (BQ, 209). The power that group wields is identified through its concentration: as Quesnel puts it, "plus nous irons et plus les affaires seront entre les mains de bureaux restreints, plus elles convergeront leurs efforts entre les mains d'hommes de moins en moins nombreux," diminishing to such an extent that the disorder of the world will disappear through their increasing control (BQ, 212). Using intimidation and subterfuge, the automobilist consortium operates outside of normal legal procedures – Quesnel claims that "l'industrie...doit se placer au-dessus de la loi, parce qu'elle est la réalité du pays" (BQ, 213) – but it also controls the law: Aragon portrays the financial world as the real force behind the police, with Quesnel claiming that his automobile company was able to tie itself to the Police Prefecture "de mille manières" (CB, 907). This collaboration with the forces of order brings one advantage to the capitalist cabal's plans: the immutability of the police as an institution. As the financier Joris de Houten puts it: "N'est-ce

pas, les ministères changent, mais la police reste...” (CB, 935). Because political parties do not always remain in power (thus rendering their support of financial interests unstable), the consortium chooses to exercise its influence through the police.

In her analysis of Aragon’s novels, Mary Jean Green remarks that the capitalist characters are always colored by their shady business dealings, arguing that they are always “associate[ed] with financial dealings of dubious morality.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, Aragon goes much farther than simple immoral behavior: the capitalists in the novel are consistently shown to be the force behind a conspiracy working to bring France into a war from which they will profit, a conspiracy so vast that it controls the forces of order in the country. In this sense, Aragon traffics in popular representations of an international financial conspiracy that were rampant in the interwar era: the economic depression of the 1930s was laid at the feet of various myths in popular discourse, from a Jewish capitalist plot to the technocratic Synarchie rule to the 200 families of the Banque de France (to which I will return later in this chapter).<sup>14</sup> Whatever its particular form, the image of the financial conspiracy is often the same; and Aragon’s portrayal does little to deviate from the script: the cabal is always internationalist, profit-driven, above the law, and the motor behind national disasters.

But Aragon’s novels advance a critique of conspiracies by also adopting a skeptical stance toward methods of resistance to the capitalist plot that would reproduce its secret society model of power. In particular, anarchist terrorists are subject to forceful criticism throughout the novels. *Les Cloches de Bâle*, for example, depicts the historical gang of anarchist outlaws led by Jean Bonnot who perpetuated attacks in pre-World War I France, assassinating an investor and

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<sup>13</sup> Green, *Fiction in the Historical Present*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> On the popular myths of economic cabals, see Pierre Birnbaum’s *Le Peuple et les gros: Histoire d’un mythe* (Paris: Grasset, 1979).

placing explosives in car factories explosives, as well as a group of anarchists led by Albert Libertad that attracts the interest of the bourgeois Catherine Simonidzé in *Les Cloches de Bâle*.<sup>15</sup> Aragon's critique of such forms of resistance takes two shapes. First, the anarchist terrorist cells only appear on the margins of the narrative; the reader sees the effects of their violence but in contrast with the portrayal of the capitalist conspiracy is not allowed into their inner workings. The novels thus keep the reader from participating in the activities of the movement, hearing instead only critiques that describe it as a romantic "mystery," one capable of deluding the bourgeoisie into believing its violent methods represent a true form of politics.<sup>16</sup> Second, anarchism is seen as an ineffective type of resistance in that it only perpetuates the police regime. The validity of anarchism as an arm of the revolution is undermined by the suggestion that it is just a tool of the police (Libertad is rumored to be on the police payroll) and by the ways its terrorist attacks provide the justification for the police to use repressive force and violent tactics when fighting the workers' movement. As Maurice Rieuneau notes in his analysis of anarchists in *Les Cloches de Bâle*, the novelist's critique of the anarchist model is not so much that they have been bought by the police; that accusation is never confirmed nor disproved by the novel. Rather, it is that the anarchists are naïve, allowing their tactics to be used by the police that they oppose. As Rieuneau puts it, the novel's argument is that "l'agitation désordonnée et spectaculaire des anarchistes sert en réalité la société qu'ils prétendent détruire."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Critics have interpreted Aragon's critique of anarchism in *Les Cloches de Bâle* as a representation of his break with surrealism, itself a group fascinated by anarchism (as well as accused of being purely negative in its politics). See Maurice Rieuneau's *Guerre et révolution dans le roman français de 1919 à 1939* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 2000), 404-405; and Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's *L'Illusion politique*, 159-161.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the moment when Catherine meets the anarchist Libertad: "Elle sentait confusément qu'il appartenait à un monde étranger, inconnu d'elle. Non pas, pensait-elle, parce qu'il était ouvrier. Non, non. Mais à cause de toute sa vie, comme un mystère" (CB, 849).

<sup>17</sup> Rieuneau, *Guerre et révolution dans le roman français de 1911 à 1939*, 404.

This critique of conspiracy as a romantic and naïve form of resistance underlies the entire argument of Nizan's *La Conspiration*, published in 1938 but looking back at a group of bourgeois students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure over the course of 1928 and 1929. Enchanted by the idea of revolution, the students embark on a collective political and literary endeavor intended to attack the bourgeois regime from within, the titular conspiracy of the novel. The age of the students, and the exclusively male composition of their group, would first suggest that their conspiracy functions as a sort of political initiation, a commitment that marks the transition into the age of maturity through what one character calls "la camaraderie virile" (C, 32). In this, the group of Normaliens conceives of itself in terms similar to the virile community that Malraux's communist cell represented in *La Condition humaine*: political engagement in the novel appears as a conscious entering in to a masculine fraternity. Nizan, like Malraux, writes about the failure of the Bolshevik model of revolutionary politics, the inability of a small cell to transform the world.

Unlike the revolutionary community in Malraux's novel, however, the failure of Nizan's group never reaches the level of a fraternal tragedy; instead, it remains impotent and floundering, unable to bring about any action of real consequence. And the group's impotence is to be understood in the fullest sense of the term: as Angela Kershaw has demonstrated, the phrase "être un homme" is used in the novel (as well as in Nizan's 1931 *Aden Arabie*) to indicate a commitment to politics, and yet the narrator systematically undercuts the virile pretensions of the group ("personne n'aurait songé à les trouver dangereux," he comments).<sup>18</sup> The novel thus ironizes the manner in which the group attempts to create equivalences between their political and intellectual conspiracy and the notion of the secret society as a rite of initiation. And, I

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<sup>18</sup> Angela Kershaw, "Gender, Sexuality, and Politics in Nizan's *La Conspiration*," *Modern Language Review* 98.1 (January 2003), 27-43.



would argue, the effect is not only to problematize a gendered notion of political commitment, it is also to critique an ideology that would willingly equate the practice of conspiracy with the notion of a secret society of initiation.

The actual conspiracy of the novel's title only occupies the first section of the novel, also entitled "La Conspiracy," which presents the group's principal members: Bernard Rosenthal, the band's leader and member of a wealthy Jewish family from the XVI<sup>e</sup> arrondissement; his friend Philippe Laforgue, described by the narrator as "un jeune bourgeois français" (C, 18); and Serge Pluvillage, a bitter and isolated youth who is the sole member to join the Communist Party. With several other colleagues, they found a literary and political journal, *La Guerre civile*, and attempt to steal secret military files with the help of an enthusiastic soldier friend, with both endeavors ending in failure: the journal has limited success, and the plot is quickly and accidentally uncovered by a commanding officer. But the defeat of the conspiracy does not entail any sort of tragedy or punishment for the members of the group; it is instead marked by inconsequence and irrelevance. After the plot has been discovered, Rosenthal feels almost a sense of "exaltation": "L'idée d'un danger le soulevait: pendant quelques jours, il se sentait vivre, il pensait aux conjurations des villes d'Italie, à un monde de conspirations, de police et de musique" (C, 118). The romantic notions of danger, recalling the risk-filled adventures of the Italian *carbonari* that Stendhal had portrayed in his "Vanina Vanini" inspire a feeling of vitality in Rosenthal, but it only remains at the level of fiction: "Mais il ne se passa rien: les policiers n'étaient jamais que des passants" (ibid.).

This portrayal of the conspiracy as a youthful illusion continues to play out over the next two parts of the novel. The second chapter, "Catherine," depicts Rosenthal's growing love affair with his sister-in-law, a dalliance that Rosenthal imagines as a revolt against the bourgeois

expectations of his family, ultimately leading to his decision to commit suicide as an act of protest. Love and desire thus represents a betrayal of the masculine ideal of the conspiracy; as Kershaw puts it, “Bernard’s revolutionary potential is stifled by femininity, bourgeois ideology, and death.”<sup>19</sup> In the novel’s last chapter, “Serge,” the conspiracy becomes unraveled through outright betrayal. There, Pluvillage recounts both his decision to join the Communist Party and his betrayal of the group: he becomes a police informant, reporting on the whereabouts of the older communist militant Carré whom the group has befriended. Both Pluvillage’s commitment to the Party and his ultimate duplicity are given as two sides of the same coin, the seduction by “une vocation assez intense du mystère,” with the slip from the clandestine politics of the Communist Party to police informant a simple matter of degree (C, 262). Thus by the end of the novel, the conspiracy has been undone by youthful indiscretion, romantic illusions, and personal treachery.

Compared with the straightforward, almost classic realist narratives of Aragon’s novels, *La Conspiracy*, then, offers a more ambivalent discourse, sustaining an often ironic regard for its characters, whose attempts at political action and espoused philosophies are undercut by the distant narrator. The novel’s construction, mixing third-person narration with first-person diaries and letters, multiplies points of view and renders a uniform ideological perspective often difficult to perceive. As Susan Suleiman puts it, “it is the pertinence of any doctrinal interpretation at all that is finally put into question by the novel’s indirections and understatements.”<sup>20</sup> But one of the clear points of view that emerges from the novel is the ways in which conspiracies, or even

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<sup>19</sup> Kershaw, “Gender, Sexuality, and Politics in Nizan’s *La Conspiracy*,” 38.

<sup>20</sup> Susan R. Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 232. The distance of the novel from its characters is often commented upon by critics: Pascal Ory has noted the general “amertume” of Nizan’s portrayal, while Adèle King characterizes the narrative as “Stendhalian” in its distant regard for its characters. See Ory’s *Nizan*, 131; and King’s *Paul Nizan écrivain* (Paris: Didier, 1976), 138.

perceptions of conspiracies, only beget further betrayals and plots. The polyphonic techniques of Nizan's text allow the reader an inside view of the conspiracy, demonstrating how the youths' own political choice of conspiratorial action was conditioned by their general impression of social and familial relationships as one of suspicion, marked by "trahisons" or "complices." The youths' point of view poses bourgeois society as one large conspiracy, a point the narrator dwells on in explaining their feeling of unrest and boredom amid the political disturbances of 1929: "Ils sentaient bien que les pouvoirs publics et les familles conspiraient comme autrefois à les faire retomber dans de brillants avenir, des carrières, des soucis d'avancement, d'argent, de beaux mariages" (C, 69). In other words, it is the *normaliens* of the group who judge their society to be a clandestine act of oppression, a belief that determines the form of their response: the youths reproduce the conspiracy that they see the bourgeois family as embodying. In this sense, Nizan seems to suggest that the perception of the conspiracy is more important than its reality; it is the mistaken belief in the existence of a conspiracy that only encourages further political misdirection.

A similar logic comes into play with Pluvillage's decision to inform the police of the location of a wanted communist militant. Pluvillage is drawn to what the narrator terms "la religion de la police" because, for him, the act of betrayal represents another means of being seduced by "l'existence illégale, le jeu caché" that communism had initially presented (C, 262). Pluvillage's attraction to communism had never been a real form of political commitment, merely the seduction of an illegal activity, meaning that his turn to the police just continues his religious, mysterious vocation. Moreover, he indicates that his action stemmed from a desire for a fraternal community, but the nature of the *normaliens*' conspiracy only reinforces his feeling of isolation and exclusion: "J'étais donc remis à l'écart, admis seulement à vos demi-secrets, à votre

vie ésotérique, exclu de vos mots de passé les plus intimes, de vos connivences les plus profondes” (C, 282). As Pluvillage formulates it, the hope of the revolution is that it would create a new existence, one he evokes in terms of a space: “Je pressentais d’autres dimensions” (C, 281). But the youths’ conspiracy, rather than destroying barriers, reinforces and repeats the same exclusionary principles as bourgeois society: Pluvillage is always held apart from the others. In this, Nizan uses space to further highlight the group’s mistaken equation of a secret society with a conspiracy: the metaphorical space of the secret society is here not one of inner protection, an inner sanctum of fraternity, but one of barriers and boundaries. As Pluvillage puts it, “il y avait toujours des *altitudes*” (C, 282). The novel asserts that true revolution implies a transformative experience, the hope for Pluvillage of “un bond, une rupture, une réincarnation” (C, 297), but the conspiracy is only capable of reproducing the same patterns of division and distance that mark the corruption of bourgeois society.

### **Political Conspiracy vs. Aesthetic Transparency**

The critical approach that both Nizan and Aragon adopt in relation to the conspiratorial model of politics has certain resonances with both politics and aesthetics in 1930s France. In his depiction of communist youth caught up in the romance of conspiratorial politics, Nizan returns to a key moment in the immediate pre-history of the Communist Party, the era of Bolshevism, which provides the historical horizon for both authors’ critique of the secret society model of politics. In brief, the Bolshevik model attempted to apply the lessons of the secret rebellion of the October Revolution to all future struggles: as the only available historical example of a successful communist uprising, the Bolshevik Revolution became a powerful myth of the possibility of a clandestine rebellion.<sup>21</sup> The conspiratorial image of the Communist Party was

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<sup>21</sup> Historians have shown that the much of the communist propaganda of the 1920s was based on selling the image of the Bolshevik Revolution as a heroic struggle of danger and risk, a myth that was used repeatedly in the

not simply a mythology, but also represented a real political strategy: as the Bolshevik model assumed control of the French Communist Party, it developed a platform that ruled out any collaboration with either Socialists or reformists, using the principle of “*classe contre classe*” to justify the recourse to clandestine action. In the 1920 “Twenty-one Conditions” of the Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière (SFIO), one of the first articulations of a French adoption of the Bolshevik model, the existence of warfare between the classes is given as the justification for the pursuit of clandestine actions by communists: “Il est de leur devoir de créer partout, parallèlement à l’organisation légale, un organisme clandestin, capable de remplir au moment décisif son devoir envers la révolution.”<sup>22</sup> As Frédéric Monier has demonstrated, this image of a subversive, clandestine organization began to impose itself on the political and social imaginary of interwar France, with the figure of the “menace rouge” justifying repressive attacks on the Communist Party for crimes against national security.<sup>23</sup> This clandestine approach to politics on the left ended with the rise of the extreme right in France, most spectacularly evidenced by the violent fascist riots that erupted during the night of February 6, 1934. Faced with the growing presence of fascists in France and the rest of Europe, the French Communist Party shifted its policy to one based on class warfare to one centered on anti-fascist unity, leading to the creation

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recruitment of intellectuals to the Communist Party. See, for example, Philippe Robrieux, *Histoire intérieure du Parti communiste*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 1980), 65-66; and Jacques Fauvet and Alain Duhamel, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris: Fayard, 1977), 13-51.

<sup>22</sup> From “Les Vingt-et-une conditions,” quoted by Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995), 54.

<sup>23</sup> See Monier’s *Complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998).

of the Popular Front, which rallied together left-wing parties under the banner of opposition to fascism.<sup>24</sup>

Aragon and Nizan's novels thus represent an attempt at drawing historical lessons from the political failures of the 1920s: the conspiratorial politics of the Communist Party prior to the Popular Front did not bring about the revolutionary change that its myth had promised. Rather, that same myth was turned against the communists by the police and the state, creating the justification for systems of oppression and brutality which presaged in many respects the rise of fascism in France. The return to the recent prehistory in these novels has, then, a specific political purpose, one that attempts to narrate ways in which the communist strategy of the 1920s went off the rails. Aragon and Nizan portray the conspiracy in ways that highlight its negative approach to politics, one based on exclusion rather than inclusion, romanticism rather than maturity, and repression rather than revolution. It is a portrayal that resonates historically with the Popular Front's insistence on the notion of an indivisible front to fight fascism: the coalition was built on mass movements and displays of unity that abandoned the politics of parliamentary cabals and clandestine action.<sup>25</sup>

The opposition between the conspiracy and the masses is worked out in remarkable fashion in what is perhaps *La Conspiration*'s sole scene of idealistic political action, an account of the ceremony held in 1924 in honor of the transfer of the remains of Jean Jaurès to the Pantheon, what the narrator calls the "first political memory" of the group (C, 45). In fact, the episode occurs in two separate scenes whose opposing valences serve to underline the dichotomy

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<sup>24</sup> For the history of the Popular Front, see Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front populaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> See Simon Dell, *The Image of the Popular Front: The Masses and the Media in Interwar France* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and chapter 8 of Jackson's *Popular Front in France* for an analysis of the movement's "mystique of unity."

between the futility of the conspiracy and the power of a mass movement. The first part portrays the vigil held the night before the actual transfer, an event held at the Palais-Bourbon and primarily attended by politicians and intellectuals. The setting is marked by the narrator's continued emphasis on enclosure and darkness: the "murs de pierre...faisaient penser à la Chapelle expiatoire du boulevard Haussman et déjà aux caves et à la gloire souterraine du Panthéon" (C, 47); the funereal cloths "voilaient les lustres," creating a "clair-obscur mauve tout-à-fait demi-deuil" (ibid.); and the dank weather inspires in the attendees a desire to "quitter cette longue caverne pour marcher sous des arbres" (C, 49). The enclosed nature of the room stands in opposition to the gathered masses who remain outside of the chamber, excluded from the scene; the young group can sometimes hear shouting and music "à travers les murailles," but the masses' presence is only felt as "une espèce de vaste mer qui se brisait avec de la rage et de la tendresse contre les falaises aveugles de la Chambre" (C, 50). The immobility of the interior vigil, associated as it is with stone, darkness, and death, stands in opposition to the movement of the masses outside, charged with emotions and force. This opposition is even more pronounced by the fact that, by their very presence in this scene, the members of the group feel themselves to be part of a larger political conspiracy: "Dans ce grand alvéole de pierre, Laforgue et ses amis avaient l'impression d'être les complices silencieux de politiques habiles qui avaient adroitement escamoté cette bière héroïque et cette poussière d'homme assassiné...ils se sentaient moins que rien parmi tous ces types calculateurs et cordiaux" (C, 49-50). By remaining separated from the masses, the young group feels as if it is participating in a secret plot, one that conspires to keep Jaurès as a dead symbol, immobile and meaningless, rather than as something alive and emotional. (Ultimately, the group leaves before the end of the vigil out of boredom and disgust.) The irony of the scene, of course, is that this is precisely this model that they will adopt, as they

themselves become “complices” and “calculateurs” (although not always “cordiaux”) in their conspiratorial designs. But at this moment, the true conspiracy is not the ineffectual machinations of the adolescents; rather, it is the hidden maneuverings of a political establishment that seeks to keep hold of the masses.

The paralysis of the first scene stands in stark contrast to the vitality and movement of the second, which depicts the actual procession of Jaurès’ body through the streets of Paris to the Pantheon. The description initially indicates a similar sense of sterility: before the arrival of the cortege, the main boulevard is compared to “un lit de rivière à sec” (C, 53), and the crowd stands on the sidewalks, immobile in its waiting. When the cortege finally arrives, composed of various representatives of the Republic (described by their exterior symbols of military breastplates, kepis, and medals, Masonic ribbons), the tentative air continues until the arrival of workers, at which point “le boulevard s’emplit” and “le fleuve finalement s’est mis à couler” (C, 54). From then on, a sensation of movement and vitality dominates the scene: “On ne pouvait penser qu’à des puissances drues, à la sève, à un fleuve, au cours de sang” (C, 55). In contrast with the aura of death surrounding the vigil, a sense of life imbues this scene: “Le boulevard méritait soudain son nom d’artère” (ibid.). Rather than a funereal scene, the group participates in a birth of political consciousness and activism. Within this context of movement and life, the separation between classes in the crowd becomes blurred, with the very movement of the masses permitting the dissolution of social divisions: “Les hommes immobiles ne résistèrent plus aux hommes en mouvement, les spectateurs au spectacle, les taciturnes aux chanteurs, ils descendirent pour connaître le mouvement du fleuve; Laforgue, Rosenthal et Bloyé perdirent ce qui leur restait de respect humain, ils s’y jetèrent aussi et se mirent à chanter” (C, 56). The imagery of the street, one that transforms an urban space into a natural phenomenon, suggests how the masses in the



street destroy the barriers between sectors of society, allowing for a mixing between classes that creates a sense of vitality and motion; it is in the most literal sense of the term a *mass movement*. If the conspiracy, with its implication of exclusion and immobility is, ultimately, a dead model, the mass movement is portrayed here as its opposite: living, transformative, and powerful. Even the jaded characters of the novel feel this opposition: in a line that underlines the opposition between the conspiracy and the masses, Rosenthal remarks that “il fallait ce second cortège...pour nous nettoyer de notre nuit des ruses” (*C*, 56-57).<sup>26</sup>

I have chosen to highlight this episode in *La Conspiration* because its two scenes illustrate with particular efficiency and clarity the opposition between the conspiracy and the masses. Yet it should not be thought that this valorization of the masses is an isolated scene in works by Nizan or Aragon. In 1934's *Le Cheval de Troie*, Nizan portrays the story of a mass Communist protest against both a small group of fascists and the forces of order as a similarly heroic struggle: the spirit of collective action present among the Communists is clearly valorized against the violence of the fascists and policemen.<sup>27</sup> In *Les Cloches de Bâle*, the cumulative scene that gives the novel its title is one of a mass protest against war, a scene that, as I have suggested, also finds itself under the threat from the shadows of the conspiracy. In *Les Beaux Quartiers*, Armand Barbentane finds himself swept away by the cause of the socialists after hearing a speech by Jaurès during a mass rally in the streets of Paris, while his brother Edmond

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, as Mary Green notes, the scene ends with a remarkable clarity for the novel, with Laforgue declaring both to his comrades and, ultimately, the reader, “On sait avec qui il faut être” (*C*, 56). See Green's *Fiction in the Historical Present: French Writers and the Thirties*, 192-193. It should be noted, however, that this scene of birth is short-lived: the group's political consciousness soon falls victim to the distractions of youth.

<sup>27</sup> On the heroic nature of the Communist masses in *Le Cheval de Troie*, see Suleiman's *Authoritarian Fictions*, 102-109. Given that this novel does not explicitly deal with conspiracies, I have chosen not to study in detail its valorization of mass movements. It should be noted, however, that this novel is frequently cited as an example of socialist realism in Nizan's oeuvre, in particular in its advocacy of mass protests in the context of the Popular Front. See, for example, in addition to Suleiman, Mary Green's *Fiction in the Historical Present*, 179-184; and Catherine Porter's “Nizan's *Cheval de Troie* and the Problem of the Roman à thèse,” *Romanic Review*, 73:2 (March 1982): 233-248.

remains isolated in the individualistic “beaux quartiers” of the bourgeoisie, increasingly embroiled in a police plot. As Susan Suleiman has argued, the ideological novel often functions through clear-cut binary oppositions: here, the conspiracy functions as the “negative” pole that helps orient the reader toward the “positive” pole of unified action.<sup>28</sup> These scenes of mass politics thus provide the oppositional counterpoint to the criticism of the conspiracy: collective action through mass politics allows for barriers between classes to be dissolved and for paralysis to give way to transformative change.

As part of its program of unified action, the Popular Front encouraged a reconsideration of the role of the intellectual, insisting on cultural programs that would break down the barriers between art and the masses, through songs and film to painting and literature.<sup>29</sup> The role of literature as a political tool had already been at issue throughout the early 1930s, presented in ways that prefigured the Popular Front’s ideal of the intellectual in solidarity with the masses. In his 1932 essay “Littérature révolutionnaire en France,” Nizan distinguishes between bourgeois and revolutionary literature, constructing an argument that associates the former with the obscuring tendencies of class that produces it. For Nizan, the value of revolutionary literature is to be found in its practice of openness and transparency: “Toute littérature est propagande. La propagande bourgeoise est idéaliste, elle cache son jeu, elle dissimule les fins qu’elle poursuit en secret: ces fins sont inavouables. La propagande révolutionnaire sait qu’elle est propagande, elle publie ses fins avec une franchise complète.”<sup>30</sup> For Nizan, bourgeois literature serves as a sort of

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<sup>28</sup> See *Authoritarian Fictions*. Suleiman argues that often this opposition is between individualism and group politics (particularly in *Les Beaux Quartiers* and *Le Cheval de Troie*). The conspiracy-masses contrast would thus represent a further distinction within group politics.

<sup>29</sup> On the cultural program of the Popular Front, see Pascal Ory’s *La Belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front Populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994); and chapter 4 of Jackson’s *Popular Front in France*.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Nizan, “Littérature révolutionnaire en France,” in *Pour une nouvelle culture*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman (Paris: Grasset, 1971), 34.

cover-up, hiding the oppressive aims of its class under the cloak of idealism; in contrast revolutionary literature must be completely open, using its ideological clarity to demystify the machinations of society. Susan Suleiman has argued that this ideal of openness is one that defines the leftist *roman-à-thèse* and its techniques of ideological orientation: by clearly displaying its point of view and repeating its message even to the point of redundancy, the ideological novel presents an interpretation that is, in the end, entirely unambiguous.<sup>31</sup> For Nizan, this unambiguity is the challenge of revolutionary literature: it manages to illuminate what capitalism hides, performing the work of enlightenment through its sheer transparency.

By 1934, this project of a transparent revolutionary literature had become codified and theorized under the rubric of socialist realism. This artistic doctrine developed in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, emerging out of a series of debates, directives, and struggles to become the official aesthetic of Communism, and reaching an international audience with the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.<sup>32</sup> Held in Moscow and attended by major communist writers and intellectuals from different countries (including Aragon), the Congress intended to celebrate proletarian art, increase contacts among leftist writers, and put an end to dissent among communist intellectuals.<sup>33</sup> It also marked the establishment of socialist realism as a literary program, one that drew on the experience of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union to realistically portray society's problems and ultimate transformation. As articulated by the Soviet intellectuals P. Youdine and Aleksandr Fadeev in 1934, socialist realism is intended as "la

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<sup>31</sup> See *Authoritarian Fictions*, especially pages 55-56.

<sup>32</sup> For the authoritative account of socialist realism and its origins, see Régine Robin's *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). One of Robin's central arguments is that the aesthetic did not manifest itself in entirety *ab ovo* but instead developed through a decade of contentious debate.

<sup>33</sup> On the Congress, see Robin, 9-36; and Robert S. Thornberry, "'Le passage du singe à l'homme': Aragon et Malraux devant le réalisme socialiste," *Romanic Review*, vol. 95, nos. 1-2 (January-March 2004): 81-97.

peinture véridique et historiquement concrète de la réalité dans son développement révolutionnaire.”<sup>34</sup> It is, in essence, an aesthetic that seeks to ground its representational act in reality, in the problems of the present, while working to construct a socialist future.

In the speeches and essays compiled in the 1935 collection *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, Aragon established himself as the aesthetic’s foremost French theorist and practitioner.<sup>35</sup> In these texts Aragon frequently returns to certain tropes familiar to his Soviet counterparts: socialist realism is a tool for the reeducation of the individual; it remains oriented towards a triumphant socialist future; and it heroically portrays the socialist struggle. The aesthetic is to be based in an ideal of transparency that recalls Nizan’s characterization of revolutionary literature. Like Nizan’s contrast between bourgeois and revolutionary literature, when Aragon makes his claim for a “retour à la réalité” in *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, he constructs a sustained opposition between the tendency of capitalism to mask its brutality and the revelatory power of revolutionary writing. For example, arguing that bourgeois society has, through the spread of fascism, entered into a violent stage, Aragon notes that it has left behind all that was “lumineux” in order to adopt a “décor semblable à celui de ce grotesque Mystère de la Passion qui cache la Préfecture de police, sur le parvis Notre-Dame” (PRS, 85). Aragon repeats this criticism, arguing that capitalism’s relationship to reality is one defined by covering and concealment (“ceux qui ont intérêt à...couvrir [la réalité], à la dérober à notre vue,” 85), by a masking (“voiles à jeter sur les actions,” 86), and by trickery (“trompe-l’oeil” and “mensonges,” 86). This is a variation of an opposition Aragon erects elsewhere in *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, presenting the struggle between capitalism and its literary opponents as one between shadow and light: “Je

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<sup>34</sup> P. Youdine and Aleksandr Fadeev, “Le réalisme socialiste: Méthode fondamentale de la littérature soviétique,” *Commune*, no. 10 (June 1934): 1026.

<sup>35</sup> Aragon, *Pour un réalisme socialiste* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1935). Page references given parenthetically hereafter with the abbreviation PRS.

déclare que dans toute poésie, dans toute littérature, dans toute culture, ce qu'il est notre rôle aujourd'hui de revendiquer, à nous, écrivains qui entendons qu'il y a deux parts dans ce monde, une d'ombre, et l'autre de lumière, et qui sommes pour la lumière contre l'ombre, c'est ce qu'elles ont contenu de réalisme" (*PRS*, 73-74). In other words, the choice of realism is made in the name of enlightenment: the "shadows" of the world – mysticism, tricks, and swindling – are to be undone, laid bare by the illuminating depiction of reality as it is. Writing novels, specifically realist novels, thus fulfills the Marxist goal of revealing those ways that capitalism conceals itself.

As Régine Robin has shown, the insistence on transparency is one of the defining characteristics of socialist realist fiction: the aesthetic developed in opposition to modernist models like Brecht and surrealists who had themselves placed great importance on indeterminacy and difficulty. In contrast, socialist realism was intended as an aesthetic of readability, of demystification, and of ideological clarity.<sup>36</sup> Aragon's formulation of socialist realist fiction is indeed predicated on a break with practices of literature that had isolated the writer from the masses: Vigny's ivory tower, Stendhal's "Happy Few," Rimbaud's silence. This critique extends to Aragon's former literary colleagues of Dada and Surrealism, arguing that they are inheritors of Vigny's tradition, one that "opposait avec violence l'écrivain et le public. Le public, en général, un ennemi" (*PRS*, 49).<sup>37</sup> In other words, the commitment to anti-fascism entails a rejection of conceptions of literature which conceive of it more as closed society than as a mass movement, extending the critique of the conspiracy beyond political strategy to the

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<sup>36</sup> Robin, *Socialist Realism*, 65. Robin argues that it is precisely this insistence on clarity and certainty that renders socialist realism an "impossible" aesthetic since it remains fixed on a historical determinacy that will continually remain out of reach.

<sup>37</sup> In his 1935 review of *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, Nizan also stressed the need to bring closer the writer and the public, criticizing the elevations and evasions of the ivory tower: "Le conflit du poète et de la foule paraît aussi puérile que les phrases sur les rapports de 'l'Esprit' et la 'Masse' dont Marx se moque durement dans la *Sainte famille*." "Pour un réalisme socialiste par Aragon," in *Pour une nouvelle culture*, 178.

practice of writing: rather than remaining in the conclaves of literature, authors must engage with the masses, take them as their cause, and search for a common language that can communicate with them. As Nizan puts it, “une des tâches immédiates de la littérature révolutionnaire est de créer son public, d’atteindre son public.”<sup>38</sup> To reach its public, literature must abandon modes and practices in which writers only write for other writers or for themselves. To this end, both Aragon and Nizan portray writers who are ineffectual in communicating with the masses: in *Les Cloches de Bâle*, the novelist Maurice Schwob is depicted as a mysterious author considered hopelessly out of touch with the masses, enough to incite the almost immature attraction of Catherine Simonidzé’s mother; and narrator of *La Conspiration* remarks that the conspirators’ literary journal has a limited audience of students in the provinces, country schoolteachers, and some deranged respondents. In this sense, the critique of the conspiracy in communist politics can be seen as communicating an internal literary message, one that attempts to define the very practice of literature. It represents an attempt at wresting literature out of the confines of a closed community and towards a real engagement with the problems of the masses, one that places the author firmly in solidarity with the unified people.

If communist literature in the interwar era was conceived as an aesthetic of demystification and revelation, the centrality of the conspiracy for both Aragon and Nizan can be explained not only through the historical context of the abandonment of Bolshevism but more fundamentally through the ways in which its representation embodies the act of demystification and revelation. By its very nature, conspiracies signify what has been intentionally hidden and masked, the subversive efforts by capitalism to oppress the masses and perpetuate its regime. Through the representation of the mechanisms and machinations of industrial and police conspiracies, the socialist realist novel demonstrates to its reader that it is uncovering the hidden

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<sup>38</sup> Nizan, “Littérature révolutionnaire en France,” 37.

world of capitalism. As Susan Suleiman has argued, the ideological novel functions in part through an avoidance of ambiguity and ambivalence; it strives toward structures and themes that leave it impossible to mistake the ideology of its author.<sup>39</sup> The critical representation of the conspiracy serves as a literal act of revelation, and this literalness is precisely the point: it exposes the workings of capitalism and performs the literary act of uncovering, clearly putting on display the ideology of the author and the very transparency of the text.

Suleiman's presentation of the ideological novel analyzes above all how such texts succeed at their goal of ideological orientation, how they manage in generic and structural means to advance the political theses that undergird their narratives. Yet the leftist novel's ideal of a literature of transparency and solidarity is fraught with difficulties, particularly concerning the relationship between reader and author: while the socialist realist text is meant to speak on behalf of the masses, and to speak to them, it is also distinct from popular genres or mass fiction. This is partially a choice of subject matter – the socialist realist text is designed to address “serious” matters involving the revolutionary struggle – but also in terms of aesthetics: socialist realist style is meant to instruct, or edify, not to entertain. While the socialist realist text intends to express the spirit of the masses by creating a language and form capable of speaking of and to them, the author still must make a claim on behalf of original style.<sup>40</sup> Aragon alluded to as much in the essays of *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, when he dwelt on the example of the Soviet writers who had been able to transform themselves from intellectuals to workers: “Ils ont dû se reconstruire par eux-mêmes pour entreprendre d’être les maîtres de l’homme à venir” (*PRS*, 14). The term “maître” here is meant to recall Stalin’s dictum that writers are the “engineers of the

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<sup>39</sup> See *Authoritarian Fictions*. Robin makes a similar argument specific to the socialist realist novel in *Socialist Realism*.

<sup>40</sup> It is in part because of this aesthetic constraint that Régine Robin calls socialist realism an “impossible aesthetic.”

soul”; they perform work like everyone else. Yet at the same time, an old sense of elitism, of the elevation of the author above the public remains. Further on, Aragon again returns to the model of the Soviets by stressing the need for the creation of a transparent language: “L’écrivain qui a travaillé avec les ouvriers, les soldats, et les kolkhoziens à l’affaire commune du pays a fait un grand pas en avant pour la création du langage de l’avenir, compréhensible pour tous, sans abaissement de sa qualité technique” (*PRS*, 29). While the thrust of the argument is in favor of universally comprehensible language, the final phrase – *sans abaissement de sa qualité technique* – seems to imply that there are limits to the writer’s joining with the masses. A literature for and about the masses must still not accede to all of the desires of the masses, and it is the author’s prerogative to keep working the “technical quality” of the work.

I would contend that the representation of conspiratorial narratives presents a problematic means of achieving the ideal of establishing a text of openness and transparency, particularly concerning the position of the author. On the one hand, the criticism and revelation of conspiracies do, through opposition, indicate the “true” path towards a politics of commitment and unity. Yet on the other hand, the act of representing conspiracies complicates the relationship of the author to his readership, placing him in a position of superiority rather than of solidarity. The explanation of history through conspiracy has a paradoxical effect of at once clarifying and mystifying: it tells a seemingly rational narrative of cause-and-effect but it also returns to the realm of mythology, using a shadowy force as means of recounting powerful historical currents. In Richard Hofstadter’s formulation of political conspiracy theories, the paranoid style is fundamentally an interpretation of history that is personal: the secret enemy is individualized, with concrete political action and historical agency. As he puts it, “decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone’s



will.”<sup>41</sup> But it is also the perception of history that becomes personalized: the paranoid spokesman becomes part of the aggrieved collective that is targeted by the malevolent force, often presenting his “revelation” as his exemplary, individual work.

It should be noted that Marxism as a philosophy has been accused of being essentially a conspiracy theory pretending to be analytic thought, most notably by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. In that text, where the philosopher traces a philosophical lineage of totalitarianism and oppression from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx, Popper accuses Marxism of slipping into a personalized and mythological vision of history. One of his central arguments is that, while Marxism as a philosophy presents tools for understanding history as the movement of social systems and processes, it risks falling into the domain of pure psychology. While Marx paid heed to individual greed and the desire for profit, Popper admits, these were seen as the effects of history and the class struggle, rather than their cause. An insightful economic theory risks becoming, in Popper’s words, a “Vulgar Marxist Conspiracy Theory,” one where all historical events are fitted into the narrative of the class struggle, with the bourgeoisie and the proletariat considered not as abstract notions of class but as actual human agents.<sup>42</sup> This process of “vulgarization” is, in many ways, at work in Aragon’s socialist realist novels: while writing *Les Cloches de Bâle*, he had been profoundly shaped by his reading of Lenin’s imperialism, which argued that the Great War was a product of empires intent on extending their masses of capital, and by the economic pages of the communist daily *L’Humanité*. Similarly, he amassed much economic data in analyzing the taxi drivers’ strike that forms the drama of *Les*

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<sup>41</sup> Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 29.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 101.

*Beaux Quartiers*.<sup>43</sup> And yet the entire theoretical economic apparatus of capitalist powers becomes in the novel embodied by shadowy characters who act as diabolical agents of industry and finance: the competition of imperialist powers that had led to the Moroccan Crisis is reduced to a conversation in *Les Cloches de Bâle* between two financiers who overtly declare their intent to use war as the means to further their profits. All of the complexity of the economic and political forces behind World War I becomes a scene of remarkable expositional clarity and simplicity: one character explains the essence of the conspiracy to another.

Popper's criticisms notwithstanding, I would contend that this is, in many ways, Aragon's precise point in writing *Les Cloches de Bâle* and *Les Beaux Quartiers*: his audience is not intellectuals or academics but some other group entirely, be it the masses or workers or revolutionaries. In order to explain the lessons of World War I in a way that escapes misprision, Aragon poses the figure of the conspiracy as the most transparent and evident means of explaining the historical forces that culminated in the war. Moreover, his writing is motivated in an ideological manner in a way that Popper would push against: the novels are intended not only to instruct their public on the causes of World War I, but to encourage them to stand up against the forces of capitalism. It represents above all a literary presentation of a historical narrative; and where Popper sees a "vulgarization" of the social sciences, Aragon sees a "translation" through literature:

L'histoire, c'est-à-dire les hommes qui la font, n'est pas un bloc homogène: ces hommes sont animés d'intérêts divers, et partagés en camps adverses, et la force qui pousse

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<sup>43</sup> See Roger Garaudy, *L'Itinéraire d'Aragon: Du surréalisme au Monde réel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 298-299.

l'histoire en avant est cette lutte même où ces camps s'affrontent. Le romancier qui la traduit (consciemment ou inconsciemment) est souvent le jouet de cette lutte.<sup>44</sup>

In Aragon's view, bourgeois authors have translated history into an exploration of imagination and psychology by abandoning realism; the committed communist novelist must in turn translate history through realism, to be the form that represents the spirit of the people in struggle ("celui qui traduit ce peuple français plus admirable quand il sait vaincre ses maîtres").<sup>45</sup> Thus the goal is not so much economic analysis but the translation of the process of ideological combat, with the representation of the secret society serving as an enemy against which the masses can rally.

**"Une arme de la France véritable contre les deux cents familles..."**

In this same essay where Aragon speaks of literature's ability to translate history, he invokes a historical conspiracy theory against which, he argues, the novel will serve as an effective weapon. Exemplifying the unified and indivisible culture of the masses, the novel can be considered "une arme de la France véritable contre les deux cents familles qui y gèrent les banques, les tripots et les bordels."<sup>46</sup> The "200 families" to whom Aragon refers were, as we saw in Chapter 1, the two hundred largest shareholders of the Banque de France, who determined the members of the bank's Conseil de régence. The "200 families" represent a metaphor that came to be taken as a reality: polemics and tracts regularly published the names of wealthy families (especially those of Jewish origin), and the Popular Front made the 200 families the centerpiece of their reform of the Banque de France.<sup>47</sup> The myth thus functioned in popular

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<sup>44</sup> Aragon, "Défense du roman français," *Commune* 29 (January 1936), 564.

<sup>45</sup> Aragon, "Défense du roman français," 568.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> See René Sédillot, *Les Deux cents familles* (Paris: Perrin, 1988); and Pierre Birnbaum's *Le Peuple et les gros: Histoire d'un mythe* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), 27-50.

discourse as a way of rallying the masses against capitalism, portrayed as a financial cabal bringing France to the brink of ruin. In staking the French novel as a response to the conspiracy of the 200 families, Aragon suggests that socialist realism is capable of expressing the unified voice of the French people, what he calls at one point “l’esprit profond de tout le peuple français.”<sup>48</sup> Yet I would argue that the paranoid style of Aragon’s novels, while clearly intending to place the author and the masses together in solidarity against the conspiracy of capitalism, in practice further complicates this positioning of the writer as one with his readership. In particular, the specific invocation of the myth of the 200 families in *Les Cloches de Bâle* ultimately produces a gesture of exclusion rather than of solidarity, a move that elevates the author to a status above the masses.

While both *Les Cloches de Bâle* and *Les Beaux Quartiers* make oblique references to the idea of an economic cabal through the portrayal of the automobilist consortium, the conclusion of *Les Cloches de Bâle* makes explicit the myth of the 200 families in preparing World War I. The entire chapter, which takes place at the 1912 Basel peace conference organized by the Communist Second International, serves as the culmination of the novel’s sustained representation of the opposition between the closed society of capitalists and the workers’ movement. Both Jean Jaurès and the socialist leader Clara Zetkin give impassioned rallying cries against the approaching war, and Brunel, the financier from the first part of the novel, returns to the narrative under the Italianized sobriquet “Brunelli,” sent by his masters to spy on Jaurès, an act of espionage that goes unnoticed by everyone but the narrator (who, in a display of documentary excess, cites at length from the report Brunelli sends back on Jaurès).

The conference scene takes a bizarre twist, one which has interested critics of realism, for after a fairly traditional realist novel, one in which a third-person narrative dominates, the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

narrator suddenly intervenes in the novel, stopping himself from talking about Brunelli in order to sing the praises of Clara Zetkin. It is a type of intervention that even the narrator, or rather the “author” (as he chooses to designate himself), seems to recognize is odd:

On dira que l’auteur s’égare, et qu’il est grand temps qu’il achève par un roulement de tambour un livre où c’est à désespérer de voir surgir, si tardivement, cette image de femme qui aurait pu en être le centre, mais qui ne saurait venir y jouer un rôle de comparse. On dira que l’auteur s’égare, et l’auteur ne le contredira pas. Le monde, lecteur, est mal construit à mon gré, comme à ton gré mon livre. Oui, il faut refaire l’un et l’autre, avec pour héroïne une Clara, et non point Diane, et non point Catherine. Si je t’en donne un peu le goût, la simple velléité, tu peux déchirer ce bouquin avec mépris, que m’importe !

Mais en attendant, s’il me plaît, je te parlerai sans fin des yeux de Clara... Quoi ? Tu croyais que j’en avais tout dit ? De ces yeux... (CB, 992).

This passage suggests two possible readings. On the one hand, the author strikes a position of humility, recognizing that his novel has gone off the tracks, and addressing the reader with the *tutoiement* to indicate that they are of the class, of the same community. In this version, the invitation to “rip up the book” is made since the important action is not the reading of the novel but the reconstruction of the world. On the other hand, the insistence on the part of the author of his right to continue at all costs, to take pleasure in his wanderings (“mais en attendant, s’il me plaît...”), suggests a position of hauteur, of separation from his public. The reader might believe that the author has expended himself, but the latter’s reaction (“Quoi ? Tu croyais que j’en avais tout dit?”) almost betrays disdain for the reader’s inability to understand.

Further on, through the use of the first-person plural, the author again engages the reader by taking him up in another collective, the masses in the Cathedral of Basel who are listening to Jaurès speak: “Nous étions à Bâle, je crois bien. Nous autres, rien ne nous arrête.” Aragon mixes citations from Jaurès’s speech, in particular the refrain “J’appelle les vivants, je pleure les morts et je brise les foudres!” and brutal images from World War I – gangrene, disfigured soldiers, masses of corpses. As the narrator says, “nous traversons un meeting de mutilés et de cadavres” (CB, 998). Susan Suleiman has argued that one of the primary functions of crowd scenes in ideological novels is to represent how a hero “dissolves” within a collective, effectively becoming a fictional representative of a mass movement.<sup>49</sup> Here it is the author who attempts to join up with the masses gathered at the Peace Conference: shifting from the opposition with his reader as a distinction of *je* and *tu*, the author has become part of a *nous*, creating a conjunction with the masses applauding Jaurès as he speaks. As Henri Mitterand notes, this break with the realist illusion of the impartial and distant narrator has an interesting historical effect, as the author and the reader have the advantage of a perfect view on the past recounted in the scene. They know, with some bitter irony, that Jaurès’s speech will not have its intended effect of preventing World War I, and yet they, as part of the masses, continue to applaud his message.<sup>50</sup>

While this rupture with realist convention has the intent of uniting the author, reader, and represented masses, the fusion is not perfectly seamless, in part because the author insists on a return to a conspiratorial discourse. The entire conclusion has an almost dizzying temporal effect: the author projects the reader back to the optimistic past of 1912, superimposing on that the images of the war of 1914, while imploring them to fight against the possibility of a new war.

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<sup>49</sup> Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Henri Mitterand, *L’Illusion réaliste: De Balzac à Aragon* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), 191-192.

Through it all, a sense of inevitability and of impossibility remains, the idea that economic cabals are preparing an inevitable war:

A travers tout le ciel d'Europe, et là-bas dans l'Amérique lointaine, il s'amasse des nuages obscurs, chargés de l'électricité des guerres. Les peuples les voient s'amonceler, mais à la fois leur ombre cache leur origine. Les Wisner, les Rockefeller, les de Wendels, les Finaly, les Krupp, les Poutilov, les Morgan, les Joseph Quesnel s'agitent dans un monde supérieur, fermé aux foules, où se joue le destin des foules...La guerre. La guerre se prépare. Elle est là. (CB, 999)

The typical characteristics of Aragon's critique of the conspiracy are still present here: the separation of the classes (marked in this passage by elevations and shadows), the opposition between the crowd and the closed society of industrialists, and the accusation of inevitable conspiracy organized by the latter. Now the specificity of the conspiracy, mixing the names of characters in the novel ("les Wisner...les Joseph Quesnel") with historical names commonly associated with the myth of the 200 families ("les de Wendels") superimposes the narrative of 1912 onto 1934: a public attuned to the Popular Front's attack on this mythical enemy would understand that conspiracy is not just part of the prehistory of the era; it is also alive and well, working to bring France closer to another war.

However, the author's framing of the conspiracy in terms of the masses supposes in many ways a position of superiority. The forces of capitalism have hidden their preparations for war from the masses ("les peuples les voient s'amonceler, mais à la fois leur ombre cache leur origine"), masses to which the author has repeatedly asserted his membership by the use of the inclusive *nous*. But if the clouds of war are hidden from the masses, they are crystal clear to the author: due to his historical positioning, he is able to know the devastation wrought by World

War I, as well as assert its hidden causes. Even Jaurès is unaware of the destruction that is being prepared – “Le triomphe de Jaurès est un triomphe sanglant. Les maîtres de la guerre et de la paix ne lui pardonneront jamais” (CB, 999) – allowing the author to assume a position of elevation above even the heroic socialist figure.<sup>51</sup> The paranoid spokesman occupies, as Richard Hofstadter argues, a paradoxical position: while speaking on behalf of the masses against the shadowy enemy, he also stresses the masses’ inability to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Only the political paranoid spokesman is able to see the different and disparate elements that together reveal the secret plot, often resulting in an image of a pedantic hero fighting an implacable enemy.<sup>52</sup> Here tragedy replaces pedantry, with the author’s knowledge of the devastation wrought by World War I, conferring upon him a certain authority with respect to the masses, one that bolsters his claim to a conspiracy organized by the forces of capitalism but which breaks the ties of unity with his readership.

### **“Une conception policière du monde”**

If *Les Cloches de Bâle* exemplifies the problematic appropriation of conspiracy theories by the committed novelist, *La Conspiration* performs a critique of this same paranoid style, offering the possibility of recounting the recent past without having recourse to Popper’s “vulgar Marxist conspiracy theory.” With its polyphonic structure, *La Conspiration* does not follow the classic socialist realist narratorial authority: multiple points of view compete with the ironic narrator, rendering an easy doctrinal interpretation difficult to perceive. I would argue that the critical representation of conspiracy profoundly shapes this unorthodox ideological novel, as the text works to avoid the elevation of the figure of the author by rejecting the paranoid logic of a

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<sup>51</sup> On Aragon’s use of Jaurès as a heroic figure incarnating the socialist movement, see Suzanne Ravis-Françon’s “Des discours de Jaurès au discours d’Aragon dans *Les Cloches de Bâle* et *Les Beaux Quartiers*,” in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet 2 des Annales littéraires de l’Université de Besançon* (1989), 101-133.

<sup>52</sup> Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style of American Politics,” 31-38.



conspiratorial vision of history. The distant, ironic narrator betrays a sense of knowingness about the folly of the youths' endeavor, yet he does not make the apocalyptic claims found in *Les Cloches de Bâle*. The ideological argument against conspiracies that emerges in Nizan's novel is primarily one of inconsequence, rather than of catastrophe: the prehistory that Nizan sketches is one of a misguided politics, not the narrative of a civilization on the verge of disaster.

But this is not to say that the paranoid style does not manifest itself in *La Conspiration*: when the inspector Massart attempts to convince Pluvinage to turn on his friends, he asserts that the power of the police lies in its ability to manipulate secrets, to use private information to influence public figures. Massart presents a vision that figures history as a dossier, with secrets forming the means by which history is made: "Je ne connais pas de moyen plus puissant d'agir ou de ne pas agir que cette concentration intense des information et des moyens de chantage politique et privé. C'est alors qu'on tient la puissance véritable, qu'on fabrique l'événement historique, qu'on mêle les cartes" (C, 259). According to the police inspector, true power lies in the "intense concentration" of information and power: historical events are created behind the scenes, through blackmail and manipulation. Referring to Pascal's theory of proportion between cause and effect, what Massart refers to as "une conception policière du monde," Massart argues that the secret of the police lies in its ability to mask the causes of events: "La masse et les professeurs ne voient jamais les vrais rapports parce que les causes n'ont aucune proportion visible avec l'effet et que toutes les traces sont brouillées" (ibid.). Nizan thus places the paranoid discourse solidly in the mouth of the police, who here stresses his own opposition to both the masses and intellectuals. This choice of paranoid spokesman is significant, for it erects the police in the position of pedantry and superiority: the polyphonic techniques of the novel allow for a critique of conspiracy that does not itself reproduce the conspiratorial discourse.

Nizan's association of the police with the conspiratorial viewpoint has, in addition, a literary dimension, for it marks a shift away from the traditional representation of the detective's relationship to conspiracies. As Luc Boltanski has argued, the detective of popular novels is often tied to the revelation of secret plots: the conspiracies that make up detective novels represent an investigative drive to understand the enigmas of crime and violence, with the detective serving as the heroic figure who is able to trace the threads back to uncover the conspiracy. In this, Boltanski argues, the detective novel is essentially a conservative genre, asserting the ability of the law to provide a convincing narrative for enigmatic events.<sup>53</sup> In Nizan's novel, this conservatism becomes oppression, with Massart describing his own image of the police from that of the traditional detective: "Imagine des hommes obscurs, assis dans les bureaux anonymes comme le mien, assez semblables à des araignées ou à des calculateurs, sans aucune ressemblance avec les grands détectives que nous imaginons de temps en temps pour qu'on nous aime" (C, 259). Rather than the investigative prowess of a Sherlock Holmes or an Inspector Maigret, Massart's police is closer to a machine or a spider, hidden in the shadows. The choice of the spider as an analogy has a certain conspiratorial resonance: Raoul Girardet has argued that the spider's web represents the "image symbolique privilégiée entre toutes" for conspiracy theories.<sup>54</sup> Whether intended as an explicit political commentary or not, Massart's representation of the police takes a symbol from the social imaginary, turning it into one of power for the police.

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<sup>53</sup> See Boltanski's *Complots et énigmes: Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 43. Frédéric Monier has also demonstrated the extent to which the image of the spider web dominated discourses attacking the communist "menace rouge" in the 1920s, a metaphor that Monier traces back to Eugène Sue's representation of the Jesuit Plot. See his *Complot dans la République*, 172-177.

In presenting the paranoid discourse through the vehicle of the police, the novel is able to simultaneously allude to such rhetoric and distance itself from it. Massart's theory of the police does have consequences – the communist activist Carré is arrested following Pluvillage's betrayal – but the text's almost banal treatment of the denunciation and the arrest indicate that the action is not on the level of the catastrophe of Aragon's novel. Pluvillage seems to allude to as much in his letter to Laforgue in which he explains his actions: “une dénonciation, ce n'est rien, c'est une phrase qu'on dit, c'est bien moins théâtral qu'un crime, ce n'est ni un morceau de roman noir, ni une scène de sombre opéra, mais c'est beaucoup plus irréparable que les meurtres, beaucoup plus profond” (*C*, 297). With its various negations and diminutives, Pluvillage's portrayal of his denunciation stresses its seeming insignificance in order to arrive at its true meaning: “un bond, une rupture, une réincarnation” (*ibid*). But Pluvillage's negative depiction is firmly anchored in literature: a betrayal is barely “theatrical,” less dramatic than a scene from a crime novel or an opera. In other words, attempts at representing a denunciation as such distort its true significance: it is less a question of drama and narrative than it is of existence.

The irony of Pluvillage's explanation of the non-dramatic nature of his denunciation is that it comes amid a confessional narrative that reveals to Laforgue the reasons behind his betrayal of the group. But Pluvillage's narrative – the text labels the chapter the “récit de Pluvillage” – is ultimately incomplete. After a paragraph in which he muddily describes the sense of fatality that has drawn him to his present situation, the narrator intervenes: “Le récit de Pluvillage s'achevait sur ces phrases confuses, Serge avait encore écrit trois mots: ‘Il est inutile...’, et les avait rayés.” (*C*, 300). Pluvillage's narrative remains unfinished, denying a complete sense of cause-and-effect that normally comes from the revelation of a conspiracy. To reject a conspiratorial vision of the world, the text suggests, means to reject the absolute clarity

of the causality of narrative. This resonates with one of Massart's own presentations of the "conception policière du monde." As he puts it, "le secret de la police...c'est qu'il n'y a pas d'histoire" (C, 258, emphasis in original). As Massart understands it, this negation of history goes back to the inability of the masses to perceive the true relationship of cause and effect: rather than spiritual, political, or economic forces working within history, there is just the "coup de pousse" of the police (C, 259). In a certain regard, the novel seems to justify Massart's vision: by truly refusing the conspiratorial vision of the police, to deny the cycle in which conspiracies only beget more conspiracies, there can be no history, there can be no story. Or, as Pluinage puts it, "l'homme qui veut jouer l'histoire est toujours joué" (C, 299).

*La Conspiration* ends with an act of textual reception, but not only by the reader: Laforgue receives both Pluinage's account and Rosenthal's papers from his family. In the final chapter, he falls gravely ill, a situation he compares to an initiation: "Les primitifs ont bien de la chance...avec leurs rituels de passage" (C, 302). His brush with death provides the new existence that he had been searching for before: "Fallait-il donc risquer la mort pour être un homme?... Il va falloir choisir" (C, 307). Laforgue's concluding awareness is famously ambiguous: although he indicates that he must now choose, the novel finishes without ever describing what shape that choice ultimately becomes. As Suleiman puts it, "*La Conspiration* abstains from all commentary, and consequently from any explicitly doctrinal interpretation, as far as Laforgue's evolution is concerned."<sup>55</sup> This absence of closure is, I would suggest, a movement that effectively severs the conspiratorial narrative from the secret society: in denying the clarity of consequence implied in a conspiratorial vision of history, the text must leave certain moments unexplained. It thus presents a critique of conspiratorial politics that does not fall back into a paranoid rhetoric, that eliminates the possibility of unintended consequences.

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<sup>55</sup> Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, 235.

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The difference between Nizan's nuanced and inconclusive narrative and Aragon's classic realist story can thus be tied in part to their different positions in relation to the paranoid style. By producing a conspiratorial rhetoric, Aragon makes his text much more ideologically clear, but also risks elevating the author to a position of superiority above the masses. Nizan's text avoids that danger but falls into the possible trap of rendering its ideological message obscure: the inconclusive narrative fails to articulate what sort of politics can combat the divisions and exclusions of the conspiratorial model. History can account for part of this difference: Aragon is writing at a moment when the Popular Front is ascendant, and its politics of unified anti-fascism appear both a real possibility and a political necessity. By 1938, when Nizan publishes *La Conspiracy*, the unity of the Popular Front had begun to show its cracks, as had Nizan's commitment to Communist Party orthodoxy; the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 would eventually lead him to abandon the Party.<sup>56</sup> By choosing to critique the conspiratorial model without clearly validating a different political path, Nizan's text represents the hesitations that its author may have had. The negative political lesson to be learned from the prehistory might be clear – conspiracies represent an immature and romantic form of politics – but the affirmation of a new political message may be less obvious. The irony of the history of Nizan's text is that, following his resignation from the Party and his death in the battlefields of World War II, certain critics on the left (including Aragon) circulated rumors that accused Nizan of betraying the Party. Reading Pluvineau's narrative as Nizan's own, it was alleged that his text could be read as a thinly-veiled autobiographical confession of his own act of treachery toward the Party. In other words, a novel that firmly rejects a conspiratorial vision of the world ended up becoming the supposed documentary proof for one such conspiracy theory targeting the book's author, demonstrating the

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<sup>56</sup> See Ory's *Nizan: Destin d'un révolté*.

perils of aesthetic ambiguity and the persistence, despite all efforts, of the paranoid style of politics and literature.

## Chapter 6

### Fascism's Scapegoats: Drieu, Céline, and the Fear of the Jewish Plot

In 1942, in a preface for the republication of his 1939 novel *Gilles*, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle casts a retrospective glance over his body of work, an attempt at responding to those critics who accuse him of lacking a central focus, who only see in his eclectic oeuvre “un luxe de paresse et de solitude.”<sup>1</sup> Against this critique Drieu makes the case for a unifying thread that ties together his entire *oeuvre*, a particular theme that creates a coherence where others only see disjointedness and inconsistency: decadence. Writing in 1942, Drieu’s appeal to the unifying theme of decadence would certainly resonate politically: France had fallen to Nazi Germany, it was argued, because it had become weak, sapped of vital energy by decades of political, economic, and moral decline.<sup>2</sup> Drieu – considered by at least one critic as the “most sincere and most original theorists” of fascism – was in many ways at the forefront of his literary peers in denouncing the decline of France.<sup>3</sup> In *Mesure de la France*, the 1922 text that brought him considerable attention among intellectuals, Drieu observes again and again what he calls at one moment “cette contagion de la faiblesse.”<sup>4</sup> France has abandoned its position of prominence on the international scene, to be eclipsed by America or the Soviet Union; its political system has lost its force by falling into the mediocrity of compromise; and man himself has fallen victim to

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Gilles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939). Abbreviated hereafter as *G*.

<sup>2</sup> See on this argument Julian Jackson’s *The Fall of France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-5. The political discourse on decadence existed long before the Fall of France in 1940: as Michael Winock argues, since the Revolution of 1789, the nationalist right had not stopped proclaiming the decline of France as envisioned in an intense hatred of the present and a powerful longing for a lost golden age. See his *Nationalisme, antisémitisme, et fascisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 103-112.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Henri Simon, *Procès du héros* (Paris: Payot, 1967), 152.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Mesure de la France, suivi de Écrits 1939-1940* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1964), 51. Abbreviated hereafter as *MF*.

a moral, physical, and spiritual decay. The only acceptable outcome must be a total reconsideration of French civilization, “une grande interrogation sur les fondements de tout, de nos mœurs, de notre esprit, enfin de notre civilisation” (*MDF*, 98). For Drieu, this interrogation would, after 1934, take the shape of an increasing commitment to fascism: in texts such as *Socialisme fasciste* (1934) and *Chronique politique* (1943), he proclaimed the idea of a unified Europe under fascism as the sole means of saving the French from hopeless decadence.

Yet if Drieu was at the forefront in proclaiming the decadent state of France in the interwar period, by his own admission he was not the lone trumpeter of decay. Speaking of the ways his generation came to terms with this system of decline, Drieu writes in 1942 that “tous ont dû se défendre et réagir, chacun à sa manière, contre ce fait. Mais aucun comme moi – sauf Céline – n’en a eu la conscience claire” (*G*, 10). In Drieu’s eyes, only Céline was able to respond to the decadence of France with a style and verve of his own: “Céline s’est jeté à corps perdu dans le seul chemin qui s’offrait...cracher, seulement cracher, mais mettre au moins tout le Niagara dans cette salivation” (*G*, 18). Céline had burst on the literary scene with his novels *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and *Mort à crédit* (1936), both of which gave a searing and dark portrayal of the anxieties, fears, and savagery of human existence in general, and French society in particular. Although Céline was initially claimed by the left as one of their own thanks to his depiction of the difficulties of war and poverty, the latter half of the 1930s revealed his own right-wing political tendencies, an ideological shift announced by an accompanying aesthetic turn. By the end of the decade, Céline’s literary output had shifted from the novel to the pamphlet, beginning with *Mea culpa*, his 1936 account of a trip to the Soviet Union, and infamously concluding with the anti-Semitic diatribes in three successive publications: *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), *L’École des cadavres* (1938), and *Les Beaux draps* (1941).



In these pamphlets, often patched together from other popular anti-Semitic tracts circulating in France at the time, Céline viciously attacked Jews as the root of all of France's evils.<sup>5</sup> Céline's anti-Semitic views were not unique: as Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus have shown, increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, arriving amidst grave economic difficulties, encountered xenophobic reactions across the political spectrum in France. But the particular virulence of Céline's diatribes, and the success that *Bagatelles* achieved, essentially created a discursive outer boundary that allowed other authors to express similar opinions while appearing more moderate.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I will focus on how both Céline and Drieu articulate their respective narratives of decadence by drawing on conspiratorial narratives that present the figure of a vast Jewish plot as the origin of France's national and cultural decline. While Céline and Drieu are often posed as two of the most exemplary fascist authors of interwar France, they are also often cast at opposite ends of the spectrum: Céline as the stylistic innovator and Drieu as the cold, removed elitist. The image of Céline as a mad, raving antagonist against whom Drieu can be posed as a more tame version has been primarily shaped by Julia Kristeva, who claimed Céline as the incarnation of a certain type of literary modernity, one whose out-of-bounds politics and poetics represent a truly revolutionary position. For Kristeva, Céline's anti-Semitism is of a piece with his explosion of narrative forms and his disjointed syntax, with the Jew coming to represent the object of a discourse that seeks to unleash the energy that society suppresses. Against Céline, Kristeva alludes to Drieu as the perfect example of a type of limited, moralizing

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<sup>5</sup> In her work on the sources for Céline's *Bagatelles*, Alice Kaplan demonstrates to what extent Céline was familiar with the abundant anti-Semitic literature circulating in France at the time. Although Céline never belonged to an anti-Semitic group, or to a political party, his text manifests an intimate knowledge with the textual products of such groups. See Kaplan's *Relevé des sources et citations dans Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Tusson: Editions du Lérot, 1987). See as well Yves Pagès, *Les Fictions du politique chez L.-F. Céline* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 45-49.

type of discourse, one “seduced” by fascism through an act of psychological repression.<sup>7</sup> But despite their differences, one point on which Céline and Drieu coincide is their belief in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. And if the fundamental ideological (which is to say: non-aesthetic) mark of Céline’s “madness” is his paranoid ravings, then, I would contend, Drieu cannot himself be said to be completely “rational” on this account.

My analysis will focus primarily on two texts: Céline’s *Bagatelles pour un massacre* and Drieu’s *Gilles*. *Bagatelles*, normally classified as a pamphlet, has a sprawling and eclectic structure whose length of almost 400 pages and variety of narratives defy the normal expectations of a political tract. In it, Céline recounts through his alter-ego Ferdinand the affronts that he has suffered at the hands of the Jewish plot: after opening with a dialogue concerning the failure of two ballets he wished to produce (a disappointment ascribed to the handiwork of the Jews), *Bagatelles* proceeds to lay out a first-person narrative describing the multiple obstacles that the Jews have laid out in Ferdinand’s path, from his work at the League of Nations to his failure to win the Goncourt Prize. To this first-person narrative is added a wide-ranging political diatribe that accuses the Jews of political revolution, economic dominance, and cultural supremacy; in these sections, Céline adapts, reproduces, or outright plagiarizes from anti-Semitic pamphlets circulating in 1930s France. Throughout it all, Céline’s anti-Semitic discourse betrays the stylistic innovation and excess that characterized his interwar novels.

In contrast, Drieu’s novel *Gilles* seems an almost traditional narrative, one that critics have frequently compared to the classic form of the *Bildungsroman*. The novel recounts the postwar narrative of the eponymous protagonist, a young soldier raised in Normandy by a mystical father figure and who arrives in Paris on leave from the war. There he begins a love

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), especially 181-182 for the comparison with Drieu.

affair with Myriam, the sister of one of his former fellow combatants. Drawn to Myriam's money but ultimately repulsed by their lack of passion, Gilles's character arc draws him through a series of misguided attempts at love and desire. Gilles's romantic deceptions are mirrored by an increasing disenchantment with politics and culture: in the novel's central chapter, "L'Elysée," Gilles becomes involved in public and cultural affairs, working in the government and frequenting an avant-garde group modeled after the surrealists. The novel's portrayal of the Third Republic is one of dysfunction crisscrossed by conspiracies and police plots, with the government ridden with secrets (including a plot targeting the President of the Republic): Gilles increasingly becomes disgusted with the moribund state of politics in France. This deception reaches its culmination in the novel's last chapter, "L'Apocalypse," which describes Gilles's participation in the turbulent fascist riots of February 6, 1934: the riots are presented as an ultimately ineffective response to the Jewish-Masonic plot, a burst of revolutionary fervor that is finally quelled by a return to the conspiratorial order of the Republic. After this winding progression, the end of the novel finds Gilles in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, serving an international fascist cell and attempting to bring the fascist rebellion to another country.

As I will demonstrate, Drieu and Céline's attacks first take the shape of a polemic against rationalism, seen by the fascist author as the underlying philosophy of the Third Republic, a system of thought perpetuated by both Jews and Freemasons that denies the power of experience or emotion in favor of reason. The association between Jews, Masons, and rationalism has a historical background: since rationalism's reign is seen by the right wing as originating in the Revolution and culminating in the laicization of the Third Republic, those groups often tied to Republicanism (e.g., Jews and Masons) are seen as being its primary promulgators.<sup>8</sup> In their

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<sup>8</sup> On this, see Frédéric Monier, *Complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 67-73.

critiques of rationalism, particularly in their discussions of birth and death rates, both Céline and Drieu produce conspiratorial discourses that demonstrate a statistical and data-driven zeal that Richard Hofstadter has identified as one of the signature devices of the rhetoric of the political paranoid. I demonstrate that this insistence on the power of numbers is part and parcel of a profoundly ambivalent approach to the critique of rationalism, one that ends up reproducing decidedly rationalist arguments in the articulation of the narrative of decadence as the result of a conspiratorial plot.

However, to consider Céline and Drieu just as critics of a particular order would neglect the significant ways in which they are also attempting to fashion something new, to create new political and aesthetic narratives. Alice Kaplan, for example, has argued for the need to historicize the narratives of Céline's pamphlets in order to understand how his stories are always part of larger tale of right-wing populism that attempts to give voice to the masses. With Céline, there is, in Kaplan's words, "something being built."<sup>9</sup> I would argue that the same applies to Drieu: the conspiratorial vision offered by Céline and Drieu is not simply an attack on the Jews; it also represents for them a fundamental path to knowledge, one where learning how to be paranoid symbolizes an ability to read signs.

Drieu and Céline's harangues against the Jewish plot must also be located within their own history, understood as a continuation of anti-Semitic discourses that predate the racist and xenophobic atmosphere of the late 1930s. Drieu and Céline both make use of stereotypical representations of Jews that we saw in both the Introduction and Chapter 2, discourses that portray Jews as secret agents of vice. I contend that the narratives of decadence and

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<sup>9</sup> Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 118. Kaplan's claim on behalf of historicization comes via a critique of Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Céline as the embodiment of a primitive, universal voice, one that exists outside of history. In prioritizing this pre-historical voice instead of insisting on a contextual reading of his aesthetics, Kaplan argues, Kristeva "saves [Céline] from fascism without having to deny his fascism or apologize for it" (109).

victimization that Céline and Drieu produce demonstrate not only an awareness of traditional tropes of anti-Semitism but attempt to instruct their readership into learning from and ultimately reproducing those paranoid discourses. To that end, I first analyze how Drieu's novel *Gilles* can be read as a novel of paranoid apprenticeship, where the main character's arc of knowledge draws him closer and closer to an understanding of the signs and symbols of the Jewish plot. I then turn to Céline's *Bagatelles*, reading it in relation to his novel *Mort à Crédit* in order to show that the pamphlet puts into practice a technique of understanding and reproducing paranoia in a way that the novel rejects. In these texts, the figure of the fascist is presented as a victim of the Jewish plot, but one whose narrative of victimization also provides instruction on how to recognize and resist the conspiracy. In the end, both Drieu and Céline use the paranoid plot as a way of replacing a rationalist education: if learning is seen as under the control of Freemasons and Jews, their texts propose new ways of reading and interpreting narratives, paths that will lead to the creation of new fascist narratives.

### **Decadence by the Numbers**

Although Drieu claims that he had been at the forefront of his generation in announcing the decline of France, he is in fact part of a long tradition on the right that saw the nation in a perpetual state of decadence. As Michel Winock argues in his analysis of French nationalist discourses, narratives of decadence on the right can be traced back to the Revolution, with the political tumult of the nineteenth century giving rise to a nostalgia for a lost, golden age. Winock suggests that within such discourses of decadence, history often becomes a motivated search, what he characterizes as the “explication policière de l’histoire”: decadence is not just observed, its root causes must be ferretted out in “scapegoats” and “demons.”<sup>10</sup> The point of

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme, et fascisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 112.

such a history is not just to denounce the present as a state of crisis and decline; it is also to provide a compelling narrative for this destruction, to pin down the blame on a particular actor. This act of determining a diabolic cause is a common one in times of crisis, and as we saw in the Introduction, the Jews in particular served that function in the final years of the nineteenth century. The anti-Semitic discourses that we find in Céline and Drieu are in many respects continuations of the attacks against the Jews that manifested around the Dreyfus Affair, when Jews were targeted as both representatives of a dysfunctional government and carriers of vice.<sup>11</sup>

And yet it is important to note that in both Drieu and Céline's texts, the victimization of the Jews inevitably passes through a conspiratorial framework. Jews are seen as active agents who wield too much power, bringing France to the brink of death. While it is true that we often tend to perceive scapegoats as minority collectives, this is not always the case: for example, in his religious meditation on the scapegoat paradigm, René Girard refers to times when the figure of the king was seen as bearing responsibility for social collapse.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, victimized collectives need not always be portrayed as conspiracies: Marrus and Paxton have shown how the political discourse targeting Jews in the interwar years largely focused on their depiction as a massive foreign or refugee population taxing the French economy.<sup>13</sup> Thus it is important to pay heed to the ways in which Drieu and Céline's scapegoating of the Jews often takes the form of a narrative of conspiracy, with the Jews accused of having too much power in proportion to their number.

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt has called the Dreyfus Affair a dress rehearsal of sorts for the anti-Semitism of 1930s Europe. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> See René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Fraccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986)

<sup>13</sup> See their *Vichy France and the Jews*, especially chapter 1.

For both Drieu and Céline, the moral and physical decline of the nation has a direct link to the prevailing reign of the French philosophical tradition of rationalism. For them, rationalism's valorization of reason creates a divided individual: by having existence reduced to the singular aspect of reason at the expense of experience, the individual's other aspects – notably body, soul, and morality – are neglected, eventually falling into decrepitude from misuse. As Drieu writes about the current political and cultural leaders, “eux qui sont rationalistes, ils ne savent plus que la première règle de la raison, c’est de faire la part large aux forces spontanées de la vie, de la santé, du sang” (*CP*, 52). In making his appeal to the restitution of the whole man under fascism, one whose body, mind, and soul are found within one healthy unity, Drieu makes an appeal based on proportion, or rather, disproportion: rationalists have forgotten to “faire la part large” to the vital aspects of life. This separation from the “spontaneous forces” of life by reason is one that Céline also inveighs against in *Bagatelles*. Throughout his lengthy critique of successful and established authors, Céline deems them to be products of a schooling that privileges thought over emotion: “Ils ne feront que ‘penser’ la vie... et ne ‘l’éprouveront’ jamais...même dans la guerre [...] Les parents, les maîtres, les ont voués, dès le lycée, c’est-à-dire pour toujours aux simulacres d’émotion, à toutes les charades de l’esprit, aux impostures sentimentales, aux jeux de mots, aux incantations équivoques.”<sup>14</sup> These authors can never experience life, much less give voice to it; instead, they can only give the appearance of emotion. In this sense, Céline paints rationalism itself as a type of conspiracy: although rationalists cannot feel, they recite the “incantations” and “impostures” that signal that they can.

According to both Drieu and Céline, rationalism has had an insidious influence on France because it operates through schools, becoming a training that nobody can escape. The critique of

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<sup>14</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Paris: Denoël, 1937), 165. Hereafter abbreviated as *BM*.

the education system as a malevolent influence serves as a powerful narrative of national decline, with the very site of knowledge becoming a source of corruption. This equation of education with perversion is, of course, not new – nationalist discourse often targeted leftist writers and intellectuals of being “mauvais maîtres” – but both authors identify this process of corruption as profoundly conspiratorial in nature.<sup>15</sup> Céline, for example, argues that the *lycée*, where students learn to think at the expense of experience, is nothing but a “séminaire du franc-maçon” (*BM*, 164). This is a recurring theme in nationalist discourses: the current political order of Republicanism, of which Masons and Jews are seen to be the principal defenders, is portrayed as being sapped from within by the propagation of rationalism, itself the philosophy of Masons and Jews. Drieu adopts the same logic, implying that rationalism’s grip on France has a direct link to the political influence its proponents wield. For example, in his collection of essays *Chronique politique*, Drieu argues that “le monde des instituteurs, des professeurs, des intellectuels petits ou grands qui ont la direction de la majorité politique en France, par l’intermédiaire de la franc-maçonnerie, des partis radicaux et socialistes, s’est fait de la vie humaine une conception de plus en plus étriquée, de plus en plus faussée, de plus en plus arriérée.”<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, this notion of an *intermediary*, a middle term that corrupts as it cloaks, is integral to Drieu’s articulation of a conspiratorial view, and here the conspiracy is that of the professorial body itself, a small world that has control over politics.

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<sup>15</sup> See Gisèle Sapiro’s *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), in particular chapter 2, for an overview of the discourse against “mauvais maîtres.” See as well Michel Leroy’s *Le Mythe Jésuite: De Béranger à Michelet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992) for an analysis of how Jesuits in the nineteenth century were also subject to attacks on their influence on private education. As Michel Winock suggests, the secularization of education in France at the turn of the century goes a long way towards explaining the shift of bogeyman from Jesuit to Freemason. See his *Nationalisme, antisémitisme, et fascisme en France*, 112-116.

<sup>16</sup> Drieu la Rochelle, *Chronique politique 1934-1942* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 52, my italics. Abbreviated hereafter as *CP*.



Despite this rejection of rationalism, both Céline and Drieu demonstrate a certain ambivalence with regard to its discourse using one of its defining characteristics: the use of hard data and figures to visibly and clearly demonstrate France's decline. The use of figures, numbers, and statistics serves as the empirical support to the emotional appeal made by both authors, an attempt to gird their instinctive disgust through the hard proof of numbers. Céline, for example, cites the C.G.T. syndicate on the "crise du livre" of the 1930, quoting specific numbers on the comparatively poor per capita rate of book purchases in France. Although Céline characterizes the C.G.T. report as a "document pas très substantiel," he nevertheless is drawn to these sections because of what he calls the "crudité" of their presentation of the problem: "Passages, tout en chiffres, qui veulent eux, enfin, dire quelque chose" (*BM*, 142). *Bagatelles* is, as we have mentioned, a text built on citations both attributed and hidden, and here Céline's explicit choice in excerpts represents a recourse to an outside authority, one that inadvertently justifies Céline's worldview. Rather than accepting the view that the decline in reading comes from a rise in radio, magazines, or cinema, Céline sees a reason hidden in the numbers themselves. He returns again to the report to quote further on the high rate of alcoholism: "admirons un autre passage du joli rapport, d'autres chiffres... 'l'Alcoolisme en France' parfaitement éloquents, substantiels aussi" (*BM*, 143):

'La France est le pays le plus fort consommateur d'alcool du monde... 21 litres 300 d'alcool pur, taxé par tête d'habitant... par an... (en comptant les bouilleurs de cru, ce chiffre s'élève à 26 litres par tête environ...). Les autres peuples d'Europe ont tous une consommation inférieure... D'un quart, de moitié, de trois quarts... 14 litres 84 Italie, 14 litres 80 Espagne, 9 litres 27 Belgique, 8 litres 87 Suisse, 5 litres 64 Autriche [etc.]'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Céline goes on to cite figures for all the countries in Europe.

Céline's use of the C.G.T.'s data demonstrates a particularly ambivalent rhetorical strategy: he argues that the numbers themselves are "perfectly eloquent" but he nevertheless spends the following two pages expanding on their meaning, claiming that France is being drowned by a flood of alcohol. Moreover, although Céline claims to be quoting directly the C.G.T. report, as evidenced by the presence of quotation marks in the text, several marks of his style are nevertheless apparent: the ellipses instead of periods, the absence of a conjunction in "d'un quart, de moitié, de trois quarts." Despite his claims to the contrary, the figures would seem in need of a further touch, a further explanation; their eloquence does not speak for itself. This statistical armature is many regards a classic gesture of the conspiratorial speaker and the pamphleteer, providing at once hard data to advance an argument while reading an interpretation into the numbers.<sup>18</sup> Céline's use, however, is of a different sort: he ironizes their use ("ce joli rapport") while repeatedly insisting upon them.

Céline's interest in statistics about books and alcoholism eventually leads him to a more somber conclusion, namely that France's mortality rate remains one of the highest in the world: "Mais la mortalité française demeure malgré tout l'une des plus élevées du monde... France 15,7 (pour 100), Angleterre 11,7, Allemagne 11,8, Belgique 12, Espagne 15,6, Irlande 14,4, Grèce 15,5, [etc.]" (*BM*, 145). Here, Céline gives the proof of France's decline, again with "chiffres en main" (*BM*, 146). This demographic obsession is particularly important to Céline's articulation of the Jewish plot. In one section, when speaking of World War I, Céline quotes more figures in an epigraph attributed to a "Déclaration du Grand Rabbin": "Français mobilisés: 9.950.000...Juifs mobilisés: 45.000. Français tués: 1.750.000 (1 sur 3). Juifs tués: 1.350 (1 sur 33)." But he continues: "Pour être tout à fait précis, examinons encore ces chiffres... Pendant la guerre 14-18: 1.350 tués juifs, Juifs français – En proportion cela représente un Juif pour 1.300

<sup>18</sup> See Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 32; and Kaplan, *Relevé des sources*, 24.

tués français... (1.7500.000 morts)... Ce 1/1.300e de tués, je trouve moi, qu'il représente tout à fait exactement toute l'étendue des droits juifs sur notre territoire" (*BM*, 93). The *proportion* of the numbers here makes for a powerful rhetorical gesture, primarily because Céline asserts that numbers tell the tale of history: since Jews were proportionally less active in World War I (his reasoning goes), they must be the motive force behind it. Céline's role is to interpret the "facts" ("examinons encore ces chiffres..."), to explain how proportionality is a clear and external sign of hidden power, ultimately giving rise to a political platform of sorts: "'Un juif par créneau'... telle est ma devise pour la guerre prochaine. Un juif puis un franc-maçon... En somme les vrais intéressés, les prétendants aux bénéfices, les participants au pouvoir" (*BM*, 94). The comparatively small worldwide Jewish population is, for Céline, a clear signal of the extent of its power: "Comme les Juifs ils ne sont pas beaucoup *en proportion* sur la terre (15 millions), il faut que partout ils se montrent, qu'ils soient partout à la fois, qu'ils essaient les bonnes paroles à travers les colonies juives et les puissants de la juiverie, et les tout petits Juifs aussi, occultes ou avoués, apparents ou camouflés, mais tous bien racistes aussi..." (*BM*, 101-102, my italics). The proportion, supported here by the parenthetical figure of 15 million, becomes the sign that both reveals and explains the nature of the Jewish plot. It is an argument that approaches a chiasmic reasoning: because the Jews are a minority, they have to be a vast conspiracy; and because they are a conspiracy, they can only be apprehended through their proportional minority.<sup>19</sup>

Céline's turn towards a discourse based to a large extent on numbers and demographic data has the effect of turning his own argument into one that he gives the impression of rejecting.

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<sup>19</sup> Nazi attempts at defining "Jewishness" were also based upon a supposedly rationalist, biological determination of proportion, setting guidelines for how much Jewish blood makes one a Jew. Céline himself at times demonstrates this sort of racial biological calculations: "Toutes les vedettes (à de rares exceptions près) de la scène, du film, de la chanson, de la science, de l'esprit, sont juives (*1/2, 1/3, ou 1/4...*)" (*BM*, 310, my italics). David Carroll also remarks that Drieu makes a similar biologically determined argument about race when considering the Jews. See *French Literary Fascism*, 136-139.

While *Bagatelles* continually argues for experience and emotion as the true signifiers of truth, Céline nevertheless comes armed with the “crudité” of numbers, supposedly stripped of feeling.<sup>20</sup> As Richard Hofstadter observes, this “imitation” of the enemy is one that marks the conspiratorial worldview: in attacking a malevolent enemy, the paranoid speaker will frequently (and often inadvertently) adopt its tactics (Hofstadter cites McCarthyism’s denunciation of Communism’s secrecy while adopting its own secret trials).<sup>21</sup> In fact, Céline often seems aware of this contradictory position in *Bagatelles*. Near the end of the text, Céline’s alter-ego, Ferdinand, leaves his diatribe to engage again in conversation with his interlocutor, Gutman, who warns him of the eventual reception of his text: “Tu vas te faire avoir, Ferdinand, dans la voie que tu t’engages... T’auras le monde entier contre toi, figure de légume! [...] *T’es un genre de fou qui raisonne*” (*BM*, 325, italics mine). This self-awareness on the part of Céline – the idea that his madness is a form of reason – is at once a typical Célinian touch, bringing the high down to the low, and an important rhetorical gesture. He indicates that the appearance of madness does not necessarily contradict “truth”: although his theory might seem to be out of the bounds of acceptable reason, it is precisely the force of reason that makes it true. By his own account, Céline’s role as a “prognosticator” would seem to mirror that of the most occult of the Jewish secret societies, which he characterizes as “dervicheurs, prophètes, hermétistes, incantateurs, initiés, talmudistes, féticheurs, khabalistes, mages, francs-maçons, messies, gris-gris, djibouks, etc., toute la sauce” (*BM*, 276). But the difference between Céline and these mystics is the almost mathematical “proof” of history. In speaking of the “revelations” of the *Protocols of the*

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<sup>20</sup> As Richard Hofstadter notes, this “imitation” of the enemy is one that often marks the conspiratorial worldview: in attacking a malevolent enemy, the paranoid speaker will frequently (and often inadvertently) adopt its tactics. Hofstadter cites, for example, McCarthyism’s denunciation of Communism’s secrecy while holding its own secret trials. See his “Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 32.

<sup>21</sup> Hofstadter, 32.

*Elders of Zion*, Céline argues that “C’est l’évolution des choses qui vient se superposer très exactement, *géométriquement*, miraculeusement sur de tels cauchemars. Et nous n’en revenons pas... Le pronostic des fous se vérifie” (*BM*, 277, my italics). In other words, the appearance of madness is belied by the mathematical exactitude with which the prediction comes true.

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Céline’s focus on demographic data was not the case of a lone obsession: anxieties over depopulation were rampant in the 1930s and 1940s, seen in encyclopedias, dictionaries, political manuals, and school textbooks.<sup>22</sup> Drieu himself made his literary name by considering this population conundrum with his 1922 book *Mesure de la France*, a text in which he grapples with the fact that following World War I France had remained weak and vulnerable because of its devastated population. Like Céline, Drieu insists on the problem of comparative populations: since France is not multiplying at a pace to match Germany, it will be at risk for further conquering, a weakness that represents a moral failure on the part of the French nation: “Cette absence de vingt, de quarante millions de Français est une carence, une rupture de la solidarité planétaire, une trahison. Depuis cinquante ans nous n’avons pas pris toute notre part de l’effort humain” (*MF*, 48). Like Céline, Drieu makes the argument for France’s moral and physical malignancy by repeatedly calling upon statistics, in particular demographic figures that demonstrate France’s decline: the 38 million “souls” of France in 1914 versus Germany’s 60 or 70 million “bodies” (*MF*, 38); the 20 million Germans born since 1870; the 20 million Britons who have emigrated to America (*MF*, 46); what Drieu terms the “énormes, écrasants, les groupes de neuf chiffres” representing populations of leading nations of the world (*MF*, 65). This

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<sup>22</sup> On demographic fears in interwar France, see Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 102. As a political discourse, this fear would eventually have enormous power, serving as the explanatory proof behind the Fall of France in 1940: as described in nationalist discourses, since France had not reproduced enough, its population weakness essentially invited the Nazi invasion.

obsession with birth and death rates in Drieu's work has been often been read by critics through a psychoanalytic lens: faced with the sterility of the French nation, Drieu's neurotic obsessions with reproduction, according to this reading, represent his attempt at directing an aimless libido into a creative outlet.<sup>23</sup> But I would argue that the insistence on numbers is, for Drieu as for Céline, tied to the articulation of a progressively conspiratorial worldview, one in which fascism emerges as the logical conclusion.

In *Mesure de la France*, Drieu explains his fascination with demographic statistics by reflecting on the nature of numbers themselves, whose power is suggested from the very first line: "La puissance du nombre subjugué l'esprit de mon temps" (*MF*, 37). Like Céline, Drieu sees the value of numbers in their comparative and relational association: "Le nombre lui-même est informe, inerte, inachevé comme la matière dont il énonce successivement les possibilités indéfinies. Mais d'un nombre, l'esprit rapproche un autre nombre; il établit une relation, une proportion. Alors ce nombre prend forme, il n'est plus seulement de quantité mais de qualité" (*MDF*, 38). While a singular number holds no intrinsic value, the comparison of two numbers – the birthrate in 1814 versus that of 1914, for example – leads to creation: the proportion "takes shape" ("prend forme"). Drieu says that this "rapport numérique" is nothing other than "un oracle rendu sur l'histoire de France" (*ibid.*), indicating that data can hide a particular truth. The "truth" that Drieu discovers is that France has adopted a "modest proportion" of birthrate, compared with its "monstrous" neighbors ("ces monstres") (*MF*, 65). Numbers, then, represent a sort of hidden history: "Il va falloir démêler les délicates réalités qui se dissimulent dans ces arabesques imposantes comme les symboles sur les étendards" (*MDF*, 64). Figures here recall

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<sup>23</sup> The famous scenes in *Gilles* of the protagonist's wife Pauline dying amidst the fascist riots of 1934 following an abortion are emblematic of this political and psychological knot: for Drieu, on both a personal and a political level, the impulse toward birth is never far from death. See Kaplan's *Reproductions of Banality*, 101-107; Denis Hollier, "Birthrate and Death Wish," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 919-924; and David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, 164-170.

national symbols, spiraling shapes that have a certain power but that also need to be interpreted; they “impose” their reality on top of weaker truths, and their hidden reality must be unravelled.

In *Mesure*, the fault for the declining nation seems to fall on all of France. Drieu returns again and again to the collective moral failure that has led to this state of decadence, always including himself in the guilty image: “Aujourd’hui, nous, Français, avons plus à faire avec nous-mêmes qu’avec les autres. Notre plus grand ennemi est en nous-mêmes. Il faut que nous nous tournions vers la mort qui est entrée en nous” (*MDF*, 91). Within ten years, however, as Drieu becomes more and more tempted by fascism, this moral failure, while continuing to be a collective burden, also adopts the form of a more concrete political enemy. For example, in “Ecrit dans la rue,” an essay written in reaction to the 1934 Stavisky riots, Drieu asserts that all politics is essentially the same, a “conspiration de l’hypocrisie,” as parties of both left and right conspire to maintain the current order of paralysis and interests: “La contradiction entre la droite et la gauche, c’est une parade où est tout l’art de notre gouvernement” (*SF*, 98). For Drieu, there is an equivalency between the Radicals and the Socialists, grounded on a corrupt capitalist system that seeks to occult its influence.<sup>24</sup> In articulating this problem, Drieu again asserts the power of proportion, specifically democratic representation. What is parliamentary democracy, after all, but politics governed by the rule of proportion? He writes: “Chaque fois qu’on s’est remué en France depuis 1880 pour remanier un peu le système, on n’a trouvé que ces leurres, le scrutin de liste et la représentation proportionnelle” (*CP*, 19). In one sense, Drieu’s attack on democracy is a common fascist critique of the parliamentary system, but in another, it represents a movement in his thinking on the particular nature of proportion. For example, he argues in

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<sup>24</sup> Zeev Sternhell has characterized French fascism as a movement of “neither right nor left”: fascists attacked the entire political order, asserting that both the traditional left and right needed to be surpassed by a new politically explosive force capable of eliminating the division of politics. The fact that Drieu published his political ideology under the rubric “fascist socialism” bears witness to this trend. See Sternhell’s *Ni droite ni gauche: L’idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

favor of the moral strength of what he calls a “new Jacobinism” by stressing the concentration of power in the political process: “Le Parlement ne délibère plus, les partis eux-mêmes non plus. Toutes les discussions, les hésitations, les dissensions et les décisions sont entre les mains de trois chefs du parti radical, et de trois chefs du parti socialiste” (*CP*, 103). For Drieu, parliamentary democracy, by concentrating power through the system of proportional representation, effectively becomes a conspiracy: three leaders from each party determine the outcome of all political decisions. For Drieu, democracy becomes a conspiracy when it creates a *disproportion* of power, concentrated in the hands of the few. As noted earlier, Drieu’s argument against rationalism is that it represents a small world that has attained a political majority through the intermediary of Freemasons, socialists, and radicals: he thus draws on the figure of both the secret society and the political party to demonstrate how disproportionality imposes itself on society. Fascism’s myth of totality can thus be understood as a geometric ideal, a direct correspondence between the people and the state, with the fascist leader representing an unfractured whole.

This conspiratorial view of democracy finds its fictional representation in the third chapter of *Gilles*, “L’Apocalypse,” when Gilles’s friend Clérences attempts to found a new political party. While attending a meeting of the Radical Party, Gilles remarks on the hypocrisy of the attendees:

Gilles se gaussa en songeant que, derrière cette mascarade, il y en avait une autre, assez peu croyable, bouffonnement secrète, celle de la franc-maçonnerie. Il s’amusa soudain à comparer au monde des cléricaux de province qu’il avait connu cet autre monde non moins clérical, non moins hypocrite, non moins surnois, non moins rapace, mais dépourvu d’images. Au dessus des autres, il y avait les figures des vitraux, quelque chose



qui, bon gré mal gré les doublait. Derrière ces ratichons de la libre pensée, rien, sinon les figures abstraites, exténuées, infiniment pâlottes du rationalisme petit bourgeois, de la superstition XVIIIe. (*G*, 549)

Gilles's political realization here recalls Céline's ambivalent considerations of truth: the masquerade of the Radical Party seems almost illogical – “peu croyable, bouffonnement secrète” – and yet still true, much like Freemasonry itself (described as at once rationalism and an outmoded superstition). Despite his distaste for the provincial clergymen of his youth, he recognizes a relationship, a *rapport*: as the religious iconography hovers *above* the priests, it stands in for them. Yet behind Freemasonry lies nothing, except “les figures abstraites, exténuées, infiniment pâlottes.” “Figures” here obviously evokes the ghostly faces of 18<sup>th</sup>-century *philosophes*, and yet within the context of Drieu's image of politics, it also calls to mind abstract numbers, empty figures that will fail to attain the power of religious iconography. The democratic conspiracy, then, is above all an expression of substitution, of something standing in for something else but with a disproportion of power.

For Gilles, this relationship between numbers and power has a historical dimension: in the epilogue to the novel, he remarks that his is an “époque où sont entrepris de vastes règlements de comptes... l'humanité ne peut jamais arrêter ses comptes” (*G*, 667). The settling of scores – the *règlements de comptes* – doubles as an *accounting*, a numerical determination. And such an accounting often determines that the numerical majority – the people or the masses – are at the mercy of a select few. Thus, in the novel's final pages, Gilles imagines revolutionaries throughout the world: “Il y avait une immense lutte dans le monde, ici éclatante, latente là... En Russie, il y avait des millions d'hommes prisonniers. Et des milliers en Allemagne, en Italie. Et la Chine. Et vingt autres pays” (*G*, 667). But the multitudes – the

populations of thousands upon millions in twenty countries – are undone by the work of just a few: “Gilles savait ce qu’il ferait, si la guerre éclatait, pour la France. Au dernier moment, il abandonnerait sa tâche universelle, il reviendrait se battre et, tôt ou tard, il serait retiré des premières lignes, brûlé par les revolvers communistes, à l’instigation de quelques juifs” (*G*, 678, my emphasis). This slide from the multitudes to the handful makes Gilles’s national tragedy complete: the disproportion of power that Jews have, hidden behind communist forces, translates into Gilles’s own death. Gilles as the symbol for all of the fascist revolutionaries worldwide, standing in for both their resistance and their death at the hands of “a few Jews”, encapsulates how, for him, proportion can become a tragedy, and how it can also be laid at the feet of a particular group.

### **Learning Paranoia: *Gilles***

One of the ways in which critics have often approached *Gilles* is to analyze the novel as a fascist *Bildungsroman*. As Gilles flits from one relationship or cause to another, his various relational deceptions and professional failures bring his arc ever closer to a commitment to the fascist cause. In its narrative structure, the novel is, as one early commentator summarized it, “the most complete portrait in fiction of the moral and intellectual development of a French fascist.”<sup>25</sup> Yet this idea of “development” in *Gilles* is one that has also troubled critics, since from all appearances he does not seem to move: at the beginning of the novel he is a young soldier on leave in Paris, disgusted with his contemporaries and about to begin a failed relationship, and as an adult in the third section of the novel he remains in Paris, still disgusted

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<sup>25</sup> Beatrice Corrigan, “Drieu la Rochelle: Study of a Collaborator,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 14 (January 1945). Quoted by Robert Soucy, *Fascist Intellectual: Drieu la Rochelle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 3-4.

with his contemporaries and at the end of another failed relationship.<sup>26</sup> Rather than a steady narrative development from *naïf* to adult, Gilles's arc has been characterized as "negative" and "ambivalent,"<sup>27</sup> "directionless"<sup>28</sup> and "circular"<sup>29</sup>, in all cases nullifying any sort of knowledge he might have achieved during his maturation.

A common trait of all of these appraisals is a difficulty in integrating the epilogue of the novel into the rest of its narrative. In the final hundred pages of the book, Gilles resurfaces in somewhat bizarre fashion as "Walter," a soldier fighting alongside the fascists during the Spanish Civil War. The incongruity of the epilogue, coupled with its didactic narrative rehearsing of Gilles's "rebirth" as a fascist, has led many critics to bracket, dismiss, or outright ignore it.<sup>30</sup> These reactions seem to stem from the almost too literal nature of the epilogue: in the two paragraphs she dedicates to the epilogue, Alice Kaplan deems it a "pastiche" of the religious rebirth of the fascist hero before ultimately returning to Drieu's own biography to help explain the scene as a sort of compensation for the author's own real-life decision to stand on the sidelines in the fight for fascism.<sup>31</sup> I would argue that *Gilles* ought to be read as a political

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<sup>26</sup> In Franco Moretti's formulation, the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* is primarily a narrative of mobility, both in terms of space and character: the hero (Balzac's Rastignac, or Dickens's Copperfield, for example) moves to the capital from the provinces and develops knowledge and life, eventually reestablishing roots. See *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Bongie, "Between Apocalypse and Narrative: Drieu la Rochelle and the Fascist Novel," *Romanic Review* 84:1 (January 1993): 61.

<sup>29</sup> Sebastien Côté, "L'apprentissage par la désillusion chez Drieu la Rochelle: *Gilles*, un *Bildungsroman* en trompe-l'oeil," *Les Lettres romanes* 57:3-4 (August-November 2003): 302. Côté notes further that Moretti's notion of "mobility" is nullified in Drieu's novel since Gilles observes rather than moves, remaining in Paris for the bulk of the novel.

<sup>30</sup> Côté, for example, only sees the first three parts of the novel as forming the limits of Gilles's circumscribed development. Bongie devotes more time to the episode but still arrives at a similar conclusion: Gilles's "rebirth" as Walter is just a "rebecoming."

<sup>31</sup> See Côté, "L'apprentissage"; Bongie, "Between Apocalypse and Narrative," 72-74; and Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 106.

apprenticeship, but one where paranoia and conspiracy are integral to the fascist's understanding of contemporary decadence and national decline. Following this reading, the epilogue exemplifies a certain force of narrative, since it dynamizes a political practice of paranoia: against the dead learning embodied by rationalism, the lesson of the novel is one of reading and fighting conspiracies.

From the start of the novel, Gilles takes his cues from the father figure in his life, Carentan, the Norman tutor who inculcates in his pupil an idiosyncratic history of civilization and religion. In describing his adolescence to his wife Myriam, Gilles summarizes it thus: "Le vieux le promenait dans les musées, les théâtres ou le tenait enfermé dans sa mansarde, le comblant de théories sur l'occultisme, la magie, la franc-maçonnerie, les religions primitives" (*G*, 91). The cultural lesson that Carentan gives Gilles, focused as it is on the occult, is an attempt at explaining history through a genealogy of religions, tracing the rise and decline of contemporary civilization through the lens of mysticism. Given its emphasis on race, religion, and decadence, Carentan's lifework represents a fascist alternative to a materialist vision of history: he bemoans the diminishing "Frenchness" in the blood of the nation's citizens, harking back to the soil and to tradition. The problem with Carentan's lesson, as Gilles sees it, is its lack of narrative cohesion. When Gilles returns to his tutor's house in Normandy, he is struck by what he calls "tout le bazar divin" in Carentan's study. The image of Carentan's room contains a motley assortment of cultural documents, "un monstrueux entassement de livres" giving way to images, statutes, drawings, engravings of gods "de tous les temps et de tous les lieux." Carentan's approach demonstrates both exactitude ("beaucoup de photos prises par lui-même, avec grand soin, au cours de ses voyages") and incompleteness ("des figures à peine ébauchées, d'autres grimaçantes, d'autres achevées"). Gilles's final observation underlines the narrative

obscurity of his master's work: "Tout cela était disposé selon une certaine généalogie compliquée, qu'embrouillaient des flèches et des accolades, peintes à même le mur. 'Voilà de quoi satisfaire Flaubert et Pécuchet', songea Gilles" (*G*, 149-150). As made clear by the reference to Flaubert's novel, Carentan's history is a narrative gone awry, undone by a surplus of information and by its own attempt to orient itself; the arrows and braces are the very things that muddle the story. Gilles at one point has a moment of repulsion in thinking of the "odeur de renfermé" of his tutor's study (*G*, 160): Carentan's entire endeavor seems limited, unable to find resonance beyond the confines of his library.

The novel initially depicts Gilles's reaction to Carentan's theories as one of ambivalence, particularly when faced with the confused and incoherent narrative of his history. Yet this same narrative of civilization and decadence finds a certain intelligibility once it becomes focused on a particular group, namely the Jews. Carentan's anti-Semitism is based, as he strives to remind his student, not on pure ideology, but rather on his own experience: "Et bien! moi je ne peux pas supporter les juifs, parce qu'ils sont par excellence le monde moderne que j'abhorre" (*G*, 159). But the modernity of the Jews is, for Carentan, also a mark of a primitivism, as they are also described as archaic and insular ("une religion de tribu"). Carentan's rhetoric is nothing original, reproducing as it does the contradictions and paradoxes of anti-Semitic discourses that label Jews as simultaneously modern and primitive, at once too mystical and too rationalist. While Carentan's genealogy might appear incomprehensible to Gilles in its muddled and contradictory state, his mentor's anti-Semitic discourse receives questioning, but not rejection.

Initially it appears that Carentan ascribes to the Jews a certain defenselessness in the face of modernity: they are, according to him, "sans défense," "éperdument" consumed by the modern world that they don't understand. Yet later, this image of modernity changes, and

becomes one of agency as opposed to victim. For example, when describing the post-1918 state of Europe, Carentan assails all forms of the secret society: “La France a failli à sa ‘mission.’ La misérable ‘élite’ n’a rien su faire d’une victoire qui, d’ailleurs, n’était pas la sienne... Genève, c’est toute la misère du ‘monde moderne,’ son immonde hypocrisie de capitalisme, de franc-maçonnerie, de juiverie, de démocratie socialisante, c’est toute son impuissance” (*G*, 267). In Carentan’s version, modern history can be distilled into the machinations of the small groups: the elite, Freemasons, Jews, political parties, all of which are essentially counterproductive (“c’est toute son impuissance”).

This view of politics as a conspiracy of sterility is one that Gilles comes to learn from his mentor, essentially reproducing Carentan’s discourse on Geneva in his own commentary on French politics. When Gilles endeavors to found his own political party with his friend Clérences, the two begin by summoning up the old guard of French politics, whom Gilles acridly observes as the “malotrus du prolétariat et du gauche” (*G*, 576), all marked by a corrosive hypocrisy: intellectuals who had entered communism with liberalism still alive in their spirits, doctrinaire communists looking to hide their vague, unspoken distrust (“leurs réticences et leurs velléités”), trade unionists who “se camouflaient” under the mask of corporatism. Also present are “des franc-maçons et des juifs, également déchirés entre un capitalisme si longtemps profitable et si dignement masqué de démocratie et des aspirations à une attitude plus âcre” (*G*, 577). Politics is here assigned a portrait of hypocrisy; each group’s will for revolution or change is undone by the profit and stability they draw from the capitalist system. The meeting thus leads nowhere, and Gilles’s characterization of its dead end recalls Carentan’s critique of the unproductivity of a secret society politics: “une atmosphère de solennelle et impeccable *impuissance*,” “cette première réunion si parfaitement *vide de toute virilité* et de toute humanité”

(*ibid.*, my italics). After the second meeting, characterized as “quelque bagarre de moines alexandrins,” his judgment remains unchanged: “tous ces gens étaient des gens de robe, des clercs comme dit l’autre, *tout à fait stériles*” (*G*, 581, my italics). The gendered conception of politics here has its resonances with a national narrative of decadence – it is essentially a conspiracy leading to sterility – one that has an additional echo of anti-Semitism. As we saw in Chapter 2, the figure of the Jew has often been associated in cultural discourses with femininity and sexual deviancy. As Sander Gilman has argued, the stereotype of the Jewish male as a sexually weak and ill individual made the Jew a feared symbol of social corruption.<sup>32</sup> Drieu’s portrayal of a sterile and impotent politics taps into cultural myths in order to depict the specter of the conspiracy of decadence.

One of the primary ways that the malignant modernity of the Jew is expressed in the novel is through the female form. In this, Drieu reproduces discourses surrounding the Jewish female body that were widespread throughout the nineteenth century: if the Jewish male negatively signified femininity and sexual weakness, the Jewish female often represented an ambivalent, one that both captivated and threatened.<sup>33</sup> But for Gilles, this discourse is not immediately apparent; it must be learned. Jewish modernity initially represents itself to Gilles through his eventual wife, Myriam, whom he characterizes as a “scientifique,” a description to which Carentan replies: “Oui, sans doute, je la vois d’ici. Elle est tout en abstraction... Bien sûr, elle est sûrement femme par en dessous” (*G*, 160). Myriam literally embodies the contradiction of the Jew for Carentan; she is an abstracted female body, at once all mind and all female

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<sup>32</sup> See Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Gilman has underlined the importance of the cultural discourse surrounding Jewish prostitutes. See his *The Jew’s Body*. Maurice Samuels has traced that representation in nineteenth-century literature, particularly in novels by Walter Scott and Honoré de Balzac. See *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), especially 60-73.

underneath. Gilles, we are reminded, had not known any Jews prior to meeting Myriam, and yet his initial perception of her body seems to anticipate Carentan's reading: "Un visage s'avancait vers lui. Un visage lumineux... Ce ne fut qu'au bout d'un moment que Gilles perçut que sous ce visage il y avait un corps, un corps frêle. Le buste était délicat, les jambes fines" (*G*, 45). This focus on the body as an organizing and explanatory lens is one that recurs throughout *Gilles*.<sup>34</sup> But this initial instinct becomes particularly salient and consciously realized through the novel's portrait of the female Jew as a conspirator.

The first equation with Jewish femininity and a conspiratorial plot comes through the description of Rebecca, a Jewish nurse taking care of the convalescent political scion Paul Morel, who becomes involved in a police plot targeting his father, the President of the Republic. Morel suffers a nervous breakdown after having been caught up in a politically motivated police raid on a gay cruising spot, and he comes under the care of Rebecca, who quickly demonstrates herself to be a double agent. She is, as Susan Suleiman has shown, subtly yet unfailingly ascribed the characteristics of a revolutionary communist Freudian, down to her appearance.<sup>35</sup> She is described as "petite, laide de visage et de silhouette," whose very look has given her "la patience maternelle des laides" and the ability to bewitch ("envoûter") Paul. Under the spell of her treatment (described as "moyens abusifs de la psychanalyse"), he will, in the end, tell her "tous les secrets d'une famille bourgeoise et présidentielle" (*G*, 405). If Rebecca is marked as a foreign Freudian communist, all of these (within the framework of the novel) negative attributes are later subsumed into one defining characteristic: her Jewishness. Her role in Morel's eventual

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<sup>34</sup> As Alice Kaplan has noted, all of the women whom Gilles encounters have an anatomical marker that describes in advance their role in his life: "No political position, no narrative movement, no emotion can take place in this book without passing through an allegorical female." See *Reproductions of Banality*, 96.

<sup>35</sup> Susan R. Suleiman, "Ideological Dissent from Works of Fiction: Towards a Rhetoric of the *roman à these*," *Neophilologus*, 60:2 (April 1976), 169-172.



suicide becomes the marker of the role that the Jews have in the plot against France: his death, an unforeseen consequence of a political plot, embodies the decadence of the modern world.

In considering Rebecca, Kaplan poses a rhetorical question: “Would Drieu be trying to convince us that Jewish, Freudian communists are in control of our plot lines?”<sup>36</sup> While Kaplan leaves this question aside in order to address the issue of ambivalence and desire in the novel’s approach to Rebecca, I would argue that this is precisely what the text does, and not just with its treatment of Rebecca. For as Suleiman points out, the initial presentation of Rebecca comes to us through the unreliable, highly subjective narrator, and not through the protagonist; Gilles is not present at the meeting between Morel and his nurse.<sup>37</sup> But later in the novel, Gilles finds himself in a Radical Party meeting, where he again remarks on an example of female Jewish temptation: “Sur l’estrade se pavanait une belle juive aux seins blancs, à la mâchoire dévorante qui trônait, l’Esther du Parti. Elle en avait cajolé tous les chefs et se satisfaisait d’une grandeur de camelote. Dans la déchéance des aristocraties et des peuples, les juifs arrivent pour ramasser les lauriers fanés” (*G*, 562). The insistence on the body in this passage – in particular on her breasts and jaws – is tied to the notion of control: she has “cajoled” all the party leaders through her very beauty.<sup>38</sup> But the transition here is swift between the individual female body and the group: Jews come to pillage amidst the decline of the aristocracy and the masses. What’s more, the “grandeur de camelote” referred to in this passage recalls another moment ten pages prior, when Gilles again remarks on the decadence of his continent: “La veine créatrice étant épuisée chez les Européens, la place est ouverte pour la camelote juive” (*G*, 553). The choice of the word *camelote* – an artificial piece of junk – allows Drieu to associate Jews with both capitalism

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<sup>36</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> Suleiman, “Ideological Dissent,” 171.

<sup>38</sup> On Drieu’s obsession with teeth in this novel, see Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 96-97.

and ruse, materialism and masks. Through this, the Jewish female body comes to be the site that signifies the plot of the Jews, and Gilles's increasing ability to *read* this plot is key to his own understanding of national decadence.

If, for Gilles, contemporary politics becomes a narrative of conspiratorial hypocrisy, then the standard narrative of resistance becomes an insufficient means of response. In *Reproductions of Banality*, Alice Kaplan underlines how the new fascist narrative that Drieu tries to create is based on rejecting previous forms of literature: rather than banal stories intended for the life of the mind, the fascist narrative must implicate one's body, mind, and soul. Rebecca's involvement in the political plot involving the surrealists inspires Gilles to reflect on his own participation in an intrigue:

Comment avait-il pu s'intéresser à de pareilles histoires et à de pareils personnages? Quel grotesque respect humain l'avait empêché de mettre à la porte cette affreuse juive qui venait lui rappeler un petit monde qu'il n'avait pas choisi, un petit monde de faiblesse hideuse?... Il avait vaguement espéré par moments que Galant, Caël et leurs amis arriveraient à fomenter quelque catastrophe. Et voilà que toute cette misérable agitation préfigurait son avortement dans la crise de Paul: tout ce qui pouvait produire cette bande, c'était un fait divers de ce genre. (*G*, 426-427)

In her commentary, Kaplan stresses that Gilles's first understanding is generic in nature: Gilles must leave behind not just the "fait divers" but entire stories and characters to move towards more "interesting" forms, namely the "apocalypse" of the third chapter. Kaplan primarily reads this passage and others in relationship to war: Gilles rejects the "fait divers" in order to return to the primal experience in the trenches, where the virile body cannot help be implicated.<sup>39</sup> But Gilles's first understanding is not so much in terms of armed combat, but in terms of his own

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<sup>39</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 100-101.

*plotting*: “C’était lui, Gilles, qui allait être l’instrument de la justice – quelle pauvre justice portant sur quels pauvres éléments – en réduisant tout cela au ridicule, puisqu’il allait prévenir les Morel et que la police, à supposer qu’elle eût nourri véritablement des songeries vénitiennes, serait bien obligée de les rengainer aussitôt” (*G*, 427). In other words, Gilles’s first action is to undo the narrative of conspiracy through a pitiful form of justice, reversing the “songeries vénitiennes” through machinations of his own.

This understanding of his own role in history and in politics is one that proves fundamental to his own actions at the end of the novel. At the end of this political section of the novel (entitled, tellingly, “L’Elysée”), Gilles remembers a visit he had paid to Carentan several years prior, in which his mentor describes France through the decline of a nearby village. There, Carentan bemoans the local schoolteacher’s adherence to rationality, despite the fact that he’s “not even a Freemason” (*G*, 492), and accuses “les gens de Paris” of having killed the traditional French with their politics of war and decadence. His vision for France is of a decadent victim that then becomes a malignant force from within: “Ils seront envahis. Ils sont déjà envahis. Des Polonais, des Tchécoslovaques, des bicots. Mais leur vice dévore tout de suite l’envahisseur.” French decadence represents, then, a contagion: “Il y a une puissance de syphilis dans la France,” as Gilles puts it (*G*, 494). Carentan’s scapegoating is here both accusatory and self-accusing: France has been invaded by foreigners, and it deserves its punishment, but it will also punish its invaders from within. This logic of destruction from within ultimately exerts a powerful influence on Gilles. The turning point in the novel is the February 1934 riots, when Gilles’s initial hope of a popular, transformative fascist movement sweeping through the streets is crushed by the return to the status quo: “La révolte communiste, guettée et circonvenue comme la révolte nationaliste, échouait au milieu d’une France sans gouvernement, acéphale, mais qui

de toute sa masse intestinale, noyée de graisse, étouffait son cœur. Dans toute la province les Comités, les Loges et les Cafés du Commerce retrouvaient dans leur poche la République de Stavisky qu'ils croyaient avoir perdue, et s'attendrissaient" (*G*, 606). The body politic here finds a cause for its malignancy: although France is headless ("acéphale"), the vital organs – the intestinal masses – nevertheless find themselves strangled by parties, Masonic lodges, and capitalists. Drieu chooses not to dwell on the entire historical tableau, one in which right-wing newspapers focused on parliamentary democracy as the source of the nation's ills, but his character nevertheless betrays an intimate knowledge of those accusations.<sup>40</sup> By referring to France as "la République de Stavisky," Gilles creates an equivalency between Jews, Masons, and the political order: the hope for an end to the reign of rationalism has been shattered. The initial thrill of an entire continent on the brink of a "création forte et étrange" (*G*, 587) is smashed by the conspiracy of the status quo: history here is not just made in the shadows, history is prevented from being made.

Gilles's gradual ability to recognize the signs and symbols of democracy's conspiracy helps better explain the seemingly disjointed nature of the novel's epilogue. In the last seventy pages of the novel, Gilles-as-Gilles disappears from the novel, reappearing in civil-war Spain as a militant agent whom even the narrator insists on referring to as Walter. Without proper documentation, Walter's attempts to escape from a Barcelona under siege are thwarted by his solitary status: "Le plus dangereux était peut-être de se promener seul. 'Moi qui ai été si souvent seul dans la vie, comme j'ai toujours dû avoir l'air suspect.'" (*G*, 624). Walter's understanding has thus extended to his own past: his very solitary nature has made his plotting even more difficult in that he always *appears* to be an agent of someone else. The novel itself seems to be

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Golsan even argues that Drieu is willfully obscuring the anti-democratic right's own participation in the economic and political scandals of corruption in the interwar period. See his "Drieu, Céline: French Fascism, Scapegoating, and the Price of Revelation," *Contagion*, vol. 1 (Spring 1994), 179-180.

placing its protagonist under the sign of suspicion, maintaining his cover by referring to him as Walter while at times slipping and naming him as Gilles.

Truly efficient plotting, the novel suggests, must come about through a group action, and to this end, the epilogue serves as a new creation myth. In trying to move into one of the safe zones around Barcelona, Walter finds himself in the company of soldiers from Ireland and from Poland: “Sa dernière joie dans la vie serait comme avait été sa première joie, la compagnie d’hommes entièrement ramassés sur une partie d’eux-mêmes à la fois tendus et conscients” (*G*, 670). This choice of grouping – an Irishman, a Pole, and a Frenchman, all fighting in Spain – represents the last defense of European Catholicism (and a reply of sorts to the republican fervor of Malraux’s *L’Espoir*). And Walter/Gilles’s mission has changed: the sterility of parliamentary politics has killed off any hope of a fascist revolution, so all that remains is militant action. He explains to his comrades: “Pour moi, je me suis retiré d’entre les nations. J’appartiens à un nouvel ordre militaire et religieux qui s’est fondé quelque part dans le monde et poursuit, envers et contre tout, la conciliation de l’Église et du fascisme et leur double triomphe sur l’Europe” (*G*, 674-675). The actual existence of this new order is never confirmed in the novel: Walter remains alone, rendering his actions suspect. What’s more, as Mary Green has suggested, there is no historical proof that such a fascist organization ever actually existed.<sup>41</sup> Through Walter, Drieu fashions his own myth of fascist creation, one that is founded on a group invested in its own mystery – “fondé quelque part dans le monde” – and outside of national narratives.<sup>42</sup> Walter’s own explanation of this group demonstrates his understanding of Carentan’s thoughts

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Jean Green, *Fiction in the Historical Present: French Writers and the Thirties* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), 236-237.

<sup>42</sup> Drieu himself compared his politics of “new Jacobinism” to the methods and models of organization and resistance found in Freemasonry. See *Chronique politique*, 104.

on decadence: while France's decline allows it both to be conquered by foreigners and to conquer those "invaders," Walter's group seeks to treat fascism as a conspiracy within Europe. German fascism remains tied to the idea of the nation, and Walter seeks to subvert that goal: "Nous retournerons le Fascisme contre l'Allemagne et l'Italie" (*G*, 675). In other words, to fight the conspiracy of parliamentary democracy, to overcome the international secret alliance of Jews, Masons, and capitalists, fascism itself must become an international secret force.

The epilogue of *Gilles* may then at first glance appear to be, in Kaplan's words, "cut off" from the rest of the novel.<sup>43</sup> But in the political and historical logic that the novel suggests, particularly within the context of the relationship between Carentan and Gilles, it would seem to be its necessary conclusion.<sup>44</sup> The sacrificial victimization of France at the hand of its enemies entails a *commensurate* response – we are never far from the influence of proportion with Drieu – that adopts the same forms and tactics. At that moment, Drieu suggests, narrative ceases to be tied to the banal event: it abandons the suspect, solitary man for the unified group, and it leaves the realm of the *fait divers* to become a mythology of sacrifice and creation. In other words, *Gilles* argues that if paranoia can be learned, if one can learn to detect the signs of the secret plot, then the conspiracy can also be turned against the enemy: the revolutionary plot must be adopted by fascism in order to triumph over the Jewish conspiracy.

### Reading Conspiracies: Céline

Part of the fascination of Céline's *Bagatelles pour un massacre* is that its virulent brand of anti-Semitism seemed to come out of nowhere. While his play *L'Église* had a strong current of anti-Semitism running through it, the two preceding texts – the novel *Mort à crédit* and the

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<sup>43</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> And as Richard Golsan argues, in 1939, when *Gilles* is published, the *Anschluss*, Munich Pact, and Nazi-Soviet alliance would all have suggested that the victory of fascism through armed combat was not such a far-fetched idea. See "Drieu, Céline," 180.

pamphlet *Mea culpa* – do not betray any marks of the anti-Jewish virulence of *Bagatelles* and its sequels, *L'École des cadavres* and *Les Beaux draps*.<sup>45</sup> This sudden explosion of anti-Semitic rage has posed something of a critical conundrum for Céline's critics, faced with the choice of excising or integrating the pamphlets and their ideology into the rest of his oeuvre. Henri Godard, for example, in his influential study of Céline's aesthetics, brackets for the most part the pamphlets, focusing instead on the novels, arguing that the political intent of the former does not reflect the same aesthetic goals as the latter.<sup>46</sup> But if the specifically anti-Semitic subject matter is not yet present prior to *Bagatelles*, Céline's novel *Mort à crédit* still manages to display an understanding of conspiracy and paranoia as a narrative form. Published in 1936, *Mort à crédit* recounts the flipside of France's belle époque through the difficult and dark childhood memories of Céline's fictional alter ego, Ferdinand. The son of poor shopkeepers who are constantly struggling with the misery of urban life, Ferdinand continually fails in both his education and his vocational training, a source of much anguish and anger for his parents. Their state of misery is often attributable to their inability to keep pace with a rapidly modernizing Paris, but Ferdinand's father sees another source to their difficulties: "Mon père en revenant du bureau, il ressassait les solutions... Des bien sinistres... Il faisait lui-même notre panade... Maman elle était plus capable... Il épluchait les haricots... Il parlait déjà qu'on se suicide avec un fourneau grand ouvert... Ma mère réagissait même plus... Il remettait ça aux 'Francs-maçons'... Contre Dreyfus!... Et tous les autres criminels qui s'acharnaient sur notre Destin!"<sup>47</sup> The accusation of a plot takes on an air of absurdity here: the father raving against Masons while peeling vegetables

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<sup>45</sup> On the different manifestations of anti-Semitism in Céline's life and work both prior to and after the pamphlets, see Philippe Alméras's *Je suis le bouc: Céline et l'antisémitisme* (Paris: Denoël, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Henri Godard, *Poétique de Céline* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

<sup>47</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, in *Romans I*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 600. Abbreviated hereafter as *MC*.

in the kitchen, threatening suicide while the mother pays him no heed. The individual focus of the plot also appears to verge on the ridiculous: the conspiracy is not being led against the nation or a specific culture or class, but rather against the particular fate of this family. Céline signals Ferdinand's distance from his father's obsession by placing "Franks-maçons" in quotation marks; the quotation in a paragraph (and novel) full of indirect discourse signals to the reader that the Masonic plot is a bogeyman for the father alone.

This resistance to the father's narratives of persecution is one that resurfaces throughout *Mort à crédit*. When the father turns on Ferdinand to critique one of his many mishaps, the focus shifts from the child to the parent's own manias:

Il recherchait les vices embusqués au fond de ma nature comme autant de phénomènes...  
 Il poussait des cris diaboliques... Il repassait par les transes... Il se voyait persécuté par  
 un carnaval de monstres... Il déconnaît à pleine bourre... Il en avait pour tous les goûts...  
 Des juifs... des intrigants... les Arrivistes... Et puis surtout des Franks-Maçons... Je ne  
 sais pas ce qu'ils venaient faire par là... Il traquait partout ses dadass... Il se démenait si  
 fort dans le déluge qu'il finissait par m'oublier. (MC, 651).

The father's initial rage against his son eventually turns to his own situation, as he ends up carried away by his ravings; it becomes a persecution complex in which he loses himself. But Ferdinand underlines his own incomprehension, failing to understand what exactly the Freemasons have to do with his father's own miseries. The typically Célinian ellipses here between "des juifs... des intrigants... les Arrivistes... Et puis surtout des Franks-Maçons" suggests not only the orality of the father's obsessions but the incomplete nature of the persecution narrative. Part of the reason Ferdinand cannot understand "ce qu'ils venaient faire par là" is that the narrative remains incomplete, as in another moment of the father's delirium: "Il



vitupérait, il arrêta pas... Tout le bataclan des maléfices... Le Destin... Les Juifs... La Poisse... L'Exposition... La Providence... Les Francs-Maçons" (*MC*, 688-689). The point of the persecutory obsessions in *Mort à crédit* is that they are never fully explained; they stretch Ferdinand's capacity for credulity because the ellipses are (literally) never filled in, the story remains incomplete. Even when Ferdinand goes to live with the inventor Courtial, who proves to be an equally incapable figure to the boy, he is witness to yet another persecutory madness of an elder, this time one who sees the presence of a "cabal" when his harebrained schemes come home to roost.<sup>48</sup>

In *Mort à crédit*, then, Céline signals a distancing between the son and the discourse of paranoia and scapegoating that overtakes the novel's father. As Godard argues, this distancing is part of the ideological work of the novel: through the representation of the moralizing mother and the paranoid father, Céline "met à distance et dénonce un certain système de représentations, de comportements et de valeurs."<sup>49</sup> For its part, *Bagatelles* reproduces the narrative of an indoctrination of a conspiracy theory, but one with radically different results. In particular, the episode concerning Céline's time spent at the League of Nations demonstrates how an effective brand of paranoia can essentially be learned.<sup>50</sup> In this section of the pamphlet, Céline goes to work at the League of Nations, under the supervision of a Jewish manager, Yubelblat, who shares with the father of *Mort à crédit* an obsessive nature focused on secret plots. But he has a

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<sup>48</sup> See in particular *MC*, 961-969.

<sup>49</sup> Godard, "Mort à Crédit: Notice," in Céline, *Romans I*, 1312.

<sup>50</sup> Critics have noted that Céline's criticisms of the League of Nations in *L'Eglise* and *Bagatelles* come from his own experiences working there, and have thus made links between the autobiographical elements of *Mort à crédit* and those of the later texts, beginning with the use of "Ferdinand" as a textual alter ego. My interest lies more with Céline's narratives of conspiracy, not with the autobiographical origins of Céline's anti-Semitism, nor with settling the debate over the continuity of his intertextual characters. On those questions, see Charles Krance, "L.-F. Céline: Just an Individual," in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, eds. Rosemarie Scullion, Philip H. Solomon and Thomas C. Spear (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 84-97; and Godard, *Poétique de Céline*, especially the chapter on the pamphlets.

different object: “C’était son dada les Jésuites, sa litanie” (*BM*, 110). In *Mort à crédit*, the father “traquait partout ses dadas,” to the incomprehension and derision of his son. In *Bagatelles*, Yubelblat’s “dada” becomes a veritable lesson, one that Ferdinand absorbs and reproduces.

The entire narrative of Céline’s time at the League of Nations is focused on the knowledge and experience he was intended to have gained. “Si les voyages forment l’âge mûr, je peux dire que je suis bien fait,” he proclaims. “Craquelure! comme j’ai voyagé! pour m’instruire, pour accroître mes connaissances” (*BM*, 99). By travelling the world, Céline ought to be learning about the health programs organized by the League; yet the real travels are not Ferdinand’s but Yubelblat’s: “Il fallait qu’il trace, qu’il revendique. Son genre de voyage favori, c’était la Chine... Il allait militer par là... Il faisait un saut jusqu’au Japon... [...] Il retraversait toute la planète pour un télégramme, pour un soupir... pour rien du tout... Il repassait par la Russie... Il repassait plus par la Russie... Il rappliquait par le Sud” (*BM*, 101). Ferdinand’s characterization of his boss is obviously intended to portray him as the incarnation of the rootless, wandering Jew: “Il faisait le Juif errant, l’homme-lubie, l’insolite” (*ibid*). But while the stereotype is attached to his interests (“l’homme-lubie,” the human whim), Ferdinand also suggests that something else is afoot. The ellipses at once create a rhythm for Yubelblat’s travels, but they also allow Ferdinand to assert that something more important is occurring: “On aurait pu penser: cette agitation est grotesque [...] Et pourtant c’était l’essentiel, faut pas se fourvoyer” (*ibid*). To prove the “essential” nature of Yubelblat’s travels, Céline calls upon metaphors of nature: his boss is at once like an ant (whose life’s mission can be summed up by the verb “fourmiller”) and like the platypus, “le faux castor incroyable,” who plunges beneath the surface and reappears far away: “Une autre fois c’est dans la Chine... dans les Balkans... dans

les ombres du monde... dans la profondeur...” (*BM*, 102). In other words, Céline suggests, by his nature as a Jew, Yubelblat *must* move, with his movement the proof of something sinister.

Céline’s time at the League of Nations allows him to distinguish between different forms of technical knowledge. His self-designated title – “secrétaire technique d’un Juif” (*BM*, 98) – alludes to his intended training, and this goal of “technical” information is one that Céline insists upon: “Yubelblat, il a essayé, c’est un fait, de me rendre parfaitement ‘technique,’ diplomatique et sagace” (*BM*, 104). In his narrative, the technical training Yubelblat offers to Céline ought to be concerned primarily with hygiene and venereal disease, in other words, the very biological degeneration that Céline observes in the national and political body. Yet for Céline, the League of Nations represents above all an opportunity to acquaint himself with the inner workings of the international Jewish conspiracy:

J’ai vu travailler les grands Juifs dans les coulisses de l’Univers, préparer les grands fricots. [...] C’est la plus grande Synagogue dans le plus grand Temple ‘Maçon’ de l’univers... C’est l’autre des combinaisons les plus vicieuses de l’Époque et de l’Avenir... [...] Je ne me faisais pas d’illusions... C’est regarder qui m’intéressait. [...] Je les ai vus venir les grands Juifs! Les plus grands ‘maçons’ de la planète, les plus inquiets, les plus arrogants, les plus emmerdants, les plus mégalophraseurs, les plus muets, les plus opulents, les plus tristes, depuis Bergson et Curie Madame, jusqu’aux Ben Simons britanniques, et Ras Tafari. (*BM*, 98)

The representation of the League of Nations as the nexus of a vast, international, Jewish plot was of course one of the trademarks of right-wing critiques of the organization; the idea of world government surpassing boundaries of national sovereignty continues to serve as a rallying cry for nationalist discourses against the United Nations. In this sense, Céline reproduces a familiar

trope in conspiracy circles, yet the manner in which he locates himself within this confines of this plot helps set up a distinction between “technical” learning on the one hand and what he would call “experience” on the other. First, the League of Nations becomes the *site* of a vast conspiracy, a den within a synagogue within a Masonic temple, a place that needs to be explored in order to be discovered. In this sense, he joins up with conspiratorial discourses dating back to Augustin de Barruel’s presentation of the Masonic plot behind the French Revolution as hidden in the “arrière-loges” of Masonry. Second, Céline insists on the truly extraordinary and far-reaching nature of the organization: the conspirators whom he has seen are at once the richest and poorest, the loudest and quietest. Last, Céline insists on his own experience as an observer: he has seen up close, with his own eyes, how the conspiracy functions: “C’est regarder qui m’intéressait,” as he puts it. Seeing is not participating, of course: Céline signals his own personal involvement in a training in conspiracy while maintaining his distance from it. He stresses that his time at the League of Nations should not signal that he was a double agent but was instead merely an observer. While Yubelblat wants to “initiate” him into the workings of the administrative machine (*BM*, 104), Céline remains mired in a “torpor” (*BM*, 99).

If Céline resists knowledge as technique or lessons, his time at the League of Nations gives him an indispensable training in questions of style, particularly for what Céline terms “Jewish style.” One of his main responsibilities for Yubelblat is to take dictation for letters and here Céline asserts that a certain “hidden” style is the trademark of Jewish writing. Yubelblat’s writing is marked by repetitions, edits, and reboots, betraying a “finesse circonlocutoire” that is at once a marker of style and a sign of ideology. When writing official political documents, Yubelblat stresses to his mentee the importance of an elliptical style:

Trop catégorique! Ferdinand! Beaucoup trop catégorique! trop aventuré!... [...] Enveloppez!... Enveloppez toujours! [...] Un doute... de la nuance... toujours dans la note élégante, vous me comprenez?... nous ménager les “surprises,” pour nous les “surprises”... nous pourrions ainsi démentir... nous reprendre... L’insignifiance! Ferdinand! Je vous l’ai recommandée!... l’Insignifiance!... comme les Jésuites... C’était son dada les Jésuites, sa litanie... Toujours enveloppés, on nous redoutera... (BM, 110)

Yubelblat’s discourse on style reveals what Céline sees as the telltale signs of Jewish aesthetics, foremost among them inauthenticity: Jewish style avoids clear meaning, introduces doubt, and signals its own apparent yet false insignificance. But Céline’s choice of transcription as the means by which he relates Yubelblat’s discourse is telling: in its fits and starts, its repetitions and rehashings, it is “circonlocutoire” without demonstrating any particular “finesse.” Yubelblat, through Céline, reveals the essence of the conspiracy of Jewish style: “Des informations... précises... pour nous... des renseignements vagues pour les autres” (ibid.). In this, Céline’s text reproduces to a large degree the anti-Semitic pamphlets with which he was well acquainted: as we saw in the Introduction, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example, purported to be an authentic transcription of a meeting of the leaders of the worldwide Jewish plot, “revealing” a fake plot to its readers.

This question of stylistic reproduction creates a series of ambiguities around Céline’s experience at the League of Nations, stemming from the idea that the inauthenticity of Jewish style is signaled by its ability to copy and be copied. First, the scene, as Céline describes it, is one of dictation: “quand je lui rédigeais ses longues lettres, ses délicates procédures...” (BM, 110). Second, the “insignificant,” obfuscating style that Yubelblat aims for is itself a copy: “l’Insignifiance!... comme les Jésuites...” In this sense, Jewish style becomes even further

degraded: not only is it not authentic, it is a copy of a copy, learned from following the other great phantom menace of international paranoiacs, the Jesuits. Lastly, Céline himself proves to be an able apprentice in learning Yubelblat's style: "A la fin il m'avait dressé, je rédigeais, super-malin, amphigourique comme un sous Proust, quart Giraudoux, para-Claudé... Je m'en allais circonlocutant, j'écrivais en juif, en bel esprit de nos jours à la mode... dialecticulant... elliptique, fragilement réticent, inerte, lycée, moulé, élégant comme toutes les belles merdes, les académies Francongourt et les fistures des Annales" (*BM*, 111). Céline here asserts that style as a matter of literary taste – "les académies Francongourt et les fistures des Annales" – is a copy of style as an ideology: the same techniques of writing that allow Yubelblat to mask Jewish power make Céline on par with the institutional writers of his time.<sup>51</sup> Even the way in which he describes his own stylistic achievement is based on comparison and copy: "*comme* un sous-Proust," "*comme* toutes les belles merdes." Inauthentic style is so inauthentic, Céline suggests, that it can be reproduced with just a bit of training. But as this passage clearly demonstrates, with its recourse to slang ("*comme* toutes les belles merdes"), its suggestive neologisms ("*dialecticulant*"), and its blunt admissions ("j'écrivais en juif"), Céline does not reproduce here any of his own feats of "inauthentic style." Instead, he resists the allure of institutional success and follows his own stylistic development: "Cette application, cette débauche, ça me gênait mon développement" (*BM*, 111). Further, he frames his decision to leave the League of Nations as an act of heroic sacrifice: "Après tant d'années, quand je réfléchis, c'est dans un coup d'héroïsme que j'ai quitté la S.D.N. Je me suis sacrifié, au fond, je suis un martyr dans mon genre" (*ibid.*). Céline's self-fashioning as a martyr is made in the name of style, with his "genre" of

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<sup>51</sup> Through her reading of this passage and others, Anne-Catherine Dutoit underlines how Céline consistently cites traditional masters of French literature (such as Les Belles Lettres) who are hailed for their literary style than for their substance or erudition. See her "Poetic Propaganda: Aesthetics and Politics in Céline's *Bagatelles pour un massacre*." Diss. Columbia University, 2009. UMI: 3373731.

scapegoating being at once his particularity and his literary endeavors (namely, the play *L'Eglise*, which he cites writing while at the League). The rest of *Bagatelles* expounds on this image of Céline-as-victim, asserting that those authors and critics who do not like Céline represent the Jewish hold on the literary establishment. In other words, Céline's act of literary martyrdom – abandoning the success of inauthentic style for his true voice – results in a further victimization when the conspiracy of literary prizes and accolades aligns against him.

Céline thus frames the moment of his literary epiphany, his aesthetic birth, as an act of self-victimization, of sacrificing himself in order to save himself and his work from inauthenticity. If that proclamation of martyrdom were all there were to Céline's stint at the League of Nations, this section of *Bagatelles* would just represent in many ways a familiar trope: in scapegoating the Jews for the putrid state of French letters, he portrays himself as the true victim. Yet his stylistic apprenticeship also gives rise to a political imperative:

Il faut apprendre, sous peine de demeurer plus sot, plus opaque, plus crédule qu'un veau dans sa première semaine, à repérer la marque, la trace, l'emprise, l'initiative des Juifs, dans tous les chambardements du monde, où qu'ils s'effectuent. [...] Il faut apprendre à déceler dans la pratique quotidienne, la couleur et le ton, la jactance, de l'impérialisme juif, de la propagande juive (ou franc-maçonne). (*BM*, 124).

To avoid becoming the victim of the Jewish plot, the helpless newborn calf, Céline argues, you must *learn* how to perceive the mark of the Jews, its “color and tone,” in the practice of everyday life. This imperative towards becoming aware of the hidden marks of Jewish power becomes a veritable lesson for his readers, in particular with the work of copying that Céline demonstrates in constructing his pamphlet. As we have already noted, part of *Bagatelles*'s critical value is the various contemporary, popular anti-Semitic pamphlets that Céline integrates into his text,

plagiarizing or adapting some while directly quoting others. In Alice Kaplan's formulation, this cutting-and-pasting is often an act of textual butchery, Céline excising whole parts of text while manipulating the name of the author or the thrust of the argument.<sup>52</sup> But there are also telling moments when Céline does, in fact, signal his own act of citation, particularly when he quotes liberally from pamphlets, in particular the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, in order to "prove" the link between the Jewish plot and the Communist menace. It is not just that Céline places his evidence in clear view through the use of quotation marks, an act that, as Kaplan notes, is done so often that it appears "excessive."<sup>53</sup> Typical among pamphleteers, the explicit signaling of quotation bolsters the claim that the accusations can be substantiated. Céline's use of quoted passages also intrigues due to his training under Yubelblat as, essentially, a copyist. If he can convincingly reproduce a text, it is because he has become skilled at copying, one trained under a master copyist (a Jew) who in turn copies another discourse (the Jesuits). Céline even goes a step further, underlining his quotations by constantly referring back to their status as copied messages: "Voici les principaux passages de cette magnifique composition" (*BM*, 278), "Rappelons pour plaisir et pour mémoire, les principales dispositions des Protocoles" (*BM*, 279), "Voici des paroles substantielles et de plus tout à fait exactes" (*BM*, 281), "Voici la liste (absolument rien de secret) dans l'Annuaire 1937-1938" (*BM*, 286). Céline makes an argument, then, for an act of "authentic" copying: instead of the inauthentic Jewish style that masks as it speaks, Céline's act of textual composition in these instances signals its own act of reproduction.

In *Bagatelles* Céline betrays a fondness for one particular type of quotation: lists of names. As Kaplan notes, these lists – catalogs of participants in the Bolshevik Revolution (*BM*,

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<sup>52</sup> See Kaplan, *Relevé des sources*, 20. Kaplan notes that the techniques of collage and cut-and-pasting of passages that Céline follows in constructing *Bagatelles* were fairly common among anti-Semitic pamphleteers, in particular by Drumont in his *La France juive*.

<sup>53</sup> Kaplan, *Relevé des sources*, 19.



282) or the Communist International (*BM*, 283) or of members of the Paris Consistory (*BM*, 286) – respond to Céline’s onomastic imperative to “know all of the true names” (*BM*, 250).<sup>54</sup> Names represent the true mark of the conspirator, the signature of the authors of the Jewish plot. But Céline does not limit his passion for lists to just names; he also catalogs all of the Trusts they are invested in (*BM*, 291-292). Irrespective of its content, the list itself as a choice for quotation represents perhaps the ultimate act of paranoid copying. For a conspiracy theory to appear convincing, it must draw first on incomplete material, since that allows its author to assert links of causality between the different elements. For this reason, the list proves particularly seductive to Céline: the names of revolutionaries, or of banks, provide the suggestion of a story, allowing him to fill in the gaps between the names to assert a wider narrative. Céline had previously asserted that “la révolution bolchévique est une autre histoire ! infiniment complexe ! tout en abîmes, en coulisses” (*BM*, 50). But the infinite complexity of the Russian Revolution becomes extremely simple, reduced to just a list of names: if one of the standard criticisms of conspiracy theories is that they provide the most complex, convoluted answer to a problem, here Céline wants to assert the opposite. To understand the history of the Jewish plot, one need only look at names. Indeed, Céline takes this defense of his conspiratorial worldview one step further: “Il se dégage de tout ceci,” he writes, “un certain relent ‘d’Ambigu’... de carbonarisme à la manqué... de complots farciformes... de prolongements gris muraille... de mafia... de pas au plafond... de grand guignol... quelque chose de ‘Tour de Nesle’... qui vous incite énormément à la rigolade” (*BM*, 284). The Jewish plot would thus appear to be like any other conspiracy theory, from the *carbonari* to the Mafia, a farcical presentation that flies in the face of probability. But Céline not only signals the possible ridiculousness of his theory, he also alludes to a history of other conspiracy theories; his would seem, then, like a copy of another theory. But this is where *his* act

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<sup>54</sup> Kaplan, *Relevé des sources*, 24.

of copying mounts a defense; for in the face of incredulity, the names persist: “Mais tout de même, il y a les noms... les personnes, les événements. [...] *Ceci ne s’invente pas*” (BM, 284, my italics). Copying thus gives proof to, and also justifies, a *lack* of invention: what Céline lacks here in style, or even the originality of his conspiracy theory, he compensates for in truth. Moreover, because he knows how to read and to write like a Jew, he is able to see the narrative that others would not, the link between “names, people, events.”

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Céline, then, much like Drieu, suggests ways of learning how to read for the conspiracy, to recognize the signs and symbols that attempt to hide the truth of the Jewish plot. They both frame the conspiracy in decidedly personal and tragic terms: Gilles caught in a storm of gunfire in Civil War Spain, Céline sacrificing his literary reputation. But the resistance to the Jewish plot must come in two forms: first, the ability to interpret history involves above all a training in seeing narratives and plots where others see only disparate, incoherent elements. If traditional education remains the domain of Jews and Masons, a way of inculcating rationalism to maintain their hold on power, fascist literature must propose new ways of reading and writing, new ways of perceiving the world: the Jewish body for Drieu, Jewish style for Céline. Second, one must learn to turn narratives of conspiracy against the enemy; reading for the conspiracy must also occasion a resistance to the plot it is writing. Gilles’s new, fascist cell represents his attempt at leaving the *fait divers* controlled by Jews, of moving from banality to heroic action. Céline’s training in copying allows him to create new plots out of names, people, and events. In this way, both Drieu and Céline suggest that learning to recognize the Jewish plot must not just be an act of reading; it also necessitates personal action and a new fashioning of narratives of resistance.

## Chapter 7

### The Conspiracy of Science: The Projects of the Collège de Sociologie

In July 1938 the *Nouvelle revue française* featured as its opening text the manifesto “Pour un Collège de Sociologie,” announcing to a larger audience the arrival on the intellectual scene of a new group whose activities had been fomenting in relative quiet for about a year. Founded in 1937 by a group of dissident surrealists, the Collège de Sociologie had a brief existence, lasting just two academic years before its dissolution in 1939 in the face of the approaching war. The project was originally conceived as a collaborative project between Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris, and held meetings in a bookstore on the rue Gay-Lussac in Paris, featuring bimonthly presentations on a variety of topics, from the structure of power and the organization of the army to theories of attraction and repulsion. The sessions attracted a mixed audience, bringing together intellectuals from differing ideological as well as aesthetic traditions from Walter Benjamin and Drieu la Rochelle to Alexandre Kojève and Pierre Klossowski. At the end of its first year, one of the auditors and eventual participants, Jean Paulhan, editor of the *NRF*, extended an invitation to the Collège’s coordinators to present texts that would (in his words) “define its ambitions” to the readers of his journal.<sup>1</sup> In response, the Collège submitted a dossier to the *NRF*, opening with the manifesto and followed by three “program-texts” from each of the organizing members: Bataille’s “L’Apprenti sorcier,” Caillois’s “Le Vent d’hiver,” and Leiris’s “Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne.”

The group manifesto was not an entirely new text: the essay, “Pour un Collège de Sociologie,” reproduced, with the addition of several new paragraphs penned by Caillois, the original announcement of the Collège’s creation, published in 1937 in Bataille’s journal

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<sup>1</sup> As remembered by Roger Caillois in his *Approches de l’imaginaire*. Quoted by Denis Hollier in *Le Collège de Sociologie, 1937-1939* (Paris: Folio, 1995), 293. All page references to Hollier’s text will be given parenthetically.

*Acéphale* under the title “Déclaration sur la fondation d’un Collège de Sociologie.” In both texts, the guiding philosophy of the Collège is given as a rejection of the perceived constraints of traditional scientific research. Since Durkheim’s *Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895), French sociology had been defined by the distance between the sociologist and the social phenomena he studied. For the Collège, sociology’s commitment to objective distance and its limited focus on primitive societies meant that it was too timid, unable to shake up the power of *idées reçues*. In the place of the objective and neutral stance of the traditional sociologist, the Collège proposed a sociology that would fully implicate its practitioners, entailing the creation of a “moral community” of intellectuals bound together by an interest in science and by a commitment to what the participants termed “sacred sociology,” defined as “l’étude de l’existence sociale dans toutes celles de ses manifestations où se fait jour la présence active du sacré” (300).

The 1938 *NRF* manifesto differs from the 1937 *Acéphale* declaration in two key ways. First, it opens with several paragraphs discussing “current circumstances” that necessitate a “critical work” (“*travail critique*”) on the relationship between the individual and society (296). This allusion to the needs of the present moment resonated with the Collège’s stated goal of using sociology to study contemporary society rather than the primitive cultures that had traditionally been the discipline’s purview. But it also demonstrates the ways in which the present moment had come to weigh upon the Collège’s activities: the increasing threat of a militarized Europe (made all too evident by Germany’s 1938 invasion of Austria) and the display of the organized masses in fascist countries were recurring tropes in the Collège’s presentations from the previous year. As made evident by the manifesto, the Collège was conceived not just as a simple scholarly colloquium; its members intended for it to respond to the political and social

crises of late 1930s Europe. But the “critical” aspect of the Collège’s work was also clearly intended as a correction of current intellectual and artistic movements; the authors argued that recent areas of exploration – dreams, the unconscious, the fantastic – had only led to what they consider as “un individualisme forcené, qui faisait du *scandale* une valeur” and an intellectual participation in politics notable for its “maladresse” (297, italics in original). The target, if not explicit, is nevertheless clear: the negative references to dreams, scandals, and the awkwardness of political activism all serve the purpose of distinguishing the Collège from its avant-garde predecessors of the surrealist movement. Despite their previous involvement in André Breton’s group, the Collège’s members aimed to replace the surrealist’s exploration of the individual and the realms of his unconscious with a collective, scientific, and rigorous method.<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that Jean Jamin has argued that the Collège ought to be understood not so much as “next to” or “outside of” surrealism but rather *against* it.<sup>3</sup>

The second way in which the 1938 manifesto differs from the 1937 version is found in its concluding paragraph, in which Caillois outlines the objects of study that the Collège will focus on. Starting from the supposition that the individual valorizes certain rare, violent and extreme moments of experience, the Collège proposes to examine how equivalent instances are manifested at the social level, in organizations such as churches, armies, fraternities, and secret societies. In studying these social forms, the manifesto pinpoints three main subjects for analysis: power, the sacred, and myth. The investigation of these areas entails “un travail entrepris en commun avec un sérieux, un désintéressement, une sévérité critique capables non seulement d’accréditer les résultats éventuels mais encore d’imposer le respect dès le début de la

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<sup>2</sup> Leiris and Caillois had both participated in surrealist activities during the 1920s, while Bataille showed much more reticence, eventually becoming one of Breton’s most vocal critics.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Jamin, “Un sacré collège, ou les apprentis sorciers de la sociologie,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* vol. 68 (1980), 9.

recherche” (300). Its members suggest, then, that their work will have the rigor and weight of a scientific endeavor: objective, serious, and critical. However, the “désintéressement” of the researchers is swiftly belied by the following declaration, which notes that their study “dissimulates” another goal: “L’ambition que la communauté ainsi formée déborde son plan initial, glisse de la volonté de connaissance à la volonté de puissance, *devienne le noyau d’une plus vaste conjuration* – le calcul délibéré que ce corps trouve une âme” (301, emphasis added). Within the space of a few sentences, one of the particular paradoxes of the Collège becomes apparent: the declaration of disinterested scientific study gives way to the hope that a highly interested subversive action will take form, that the members will be caught up by the unleashed power of their own findings.

The suggestion that the disinterested study of social forms, including organizations such as fraternities or secret societies, will lead to the Collège itself becoming a conspiracy – what its members call the shift from the will to knowledge to the will to power – is a defining aspect of the group’s methodology. Scholars have often cited this “activist” strain of the Collège as one of its particularities. Jean Jamin states that the Collège wanted to take itself as both “projet” and “objet de recherche,” while Michèle Richman describes the group as committing “theory as well as practice” to the exploration of their social forms.<sup>4</sup> Allan Stoekl makes a similar claim by situating the Collège in the context of committed literature in the 1930s and 1940s: if intellectual work leads to more profound understandings of the truths of society, it must lead to an implementation of those truths by (in the case of the Collège) “sociologists who were also

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<sup>4</sup> Jamin, “Un sacré collège,” 12; and Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.

enthusiasts.”<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I will examine this problematic of theory and practice, of knowledge and power, in the Collège de Sociologie by analyzing the role that secret societies play in the texts that make up “Pour un Collège de Sociologie.” The secret society gives us a privileged view into understanding the relationship between literature, science, and politics in the context of the Collège. As Denis Hollier puts it in his introduction to the Collège’s conference on “Confréries, ordres, sociétés secrètes, églises,” this particular subject touches “au cœur du Collège de Sociologie, au cœur de son projet, au cœur de ses rêves, au cœur de son être même” (217). But the appeal of secret societies as both object of study and model of practice has at its own heart a number of paradoxes, particularly relating to the Collège’s relationship with literature and its status within the avant-garde.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the relationship between the Collège and Bataille’s contemporaneous, more infamous secret society Acéphale, a group whose activities remain in many respects a mystery due to the respect to the vow of silence taken by its members. Scholars have often sought to present the Collège and Acéphale as two sides of the same coin, one public and the other private, arguing in effect that Acéphale represents a “true” secret society since it remains engulfed by silence. Such a reading neglects the complicated and often contradictory strands running through both projects, and through Bataille’s thought itself: does the Collège’s public activities totally negate its aspiration to conspiracy? And does not Acéphale’s apparent lack of political impact diminish in many respects its status as a secret society? To understand the relationship between these two organizations, I read the one conference that the Collège devoted exclusively to secret societies during the 1938 term, entitled “Confréries, ordres, sociétés secrètes, églises.” This paper, originally written by Caillois but

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<sup>5</sup> Allan Stoekl, “1937, March. The Avant-Garde Embraces Science,” in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 931.

ultimately delivered (with many crucial additions) by Bataille, attempted to define the terms that the Collège would use to discuss their activities. Secret societies had already been a focus of traditional anthropological studies in the 1920s and 1930s: in his lectures to the Institut d'Ethnologie, Marcel Mauss had made them one of the categories for the study of juridical phenomena in primitive societies, and Georges Dumézil had studied the relationship between myths and secret societies in his studies of Indo-European mythologies. Caillois and Bataille pay heed to this tradition in this essay, but Bataille especially insists upon a further clarification, the distinction between “conspiratorial secret societies” and “existential secret societies” that mirrors in many ways the differences between the Collège and Acéphale, as well as between the two authors of this essay. As we shall see, while pleading on behalf of the power of a secret society grounded in the totality of existence rather than in political intrigue, Bataille suggests that he is not so much describing a secret society that is already in existence, but one that ought to be called into being in order to respond to the political crises of the 1930s.

This “potential” secret society, the one that Bataille hopes will come into being, is the focus of the second part of this chapter. Here, I will focus on the three program-texts published in the *NRF*, using the publication of the manifesto as a literary event that goes to the heart of some of the complex and contradictory issues surrounding the Collège. Martin Puchner has argued that the manifesto has a powerful performative function for the avant-garde, employing certain textual and rhetorical strategies in the aim of transforming reality. In proposing an ideal vision for the world, the manifesto first begins by shaping its own readership.<sup>6</sup> The Collège's *NRF* dossier presents a particularly challenging case study in that it contains a manifesto and three very different texts meant to illustrate the manifesto's argument. By focusing on the ways

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).



in which the authors each represent secret societies, I will bring out some of the fundamental differences between the three but also some of the undercurrents that unite them. The strategies they use for describing these organizations do not employ the cold, disinterested language of the sociological observer but instead a highly interested, metaphorically charged language. If one of the Collège's goals was a move from a literary to a scientific avant-garde, a turn away from surrealism, the allusions to the secret society in their texts for the *NRF* represent the difficulty of completely abandoning the legacy of a secret society of literature. Moreover, even while the secret societies that they each describe and attempt to create run the gamut from literary (Caillois) to existential (Bataille) to personal (Leiris), they all articulate their vision for these societies using similar terms of analysis, notably language, silence, narrative, and politics. These notions have, of course, been at issue throughout this dissertation, but the Collège's efforts at defining the intellectual practice of the secret society puts the challenge of a coherent vision into a critical relief. In particular, each author discusses secret societies by commenting on language and on speech, their texts ultimately demonstrating the limits to the cohesive notion for the Collège that the manifesto asserts. For while the Collège advances the idea of a common front, a moral community capable of infecting the society at large, it is itself infected with certain conflicts and problems that reveal much into the difficulty of its project.

### **Two Societies: Acéphale and the Collège**

The concluding call at the end of "Pour un Collège de Sociologie" seems to throw down an intellectual gauntlet: in undertaking a practice of sacred sociology, the will to knowledge must become the will to power, the idea of the group must become a conspiracy at the heart of society. But this statement of subversive purpose is perhaps less straightforward than it might first appear. In his biography of Bataille, Michel Surya pertinently asks whether this conspiratorial

desire was shared by all three co-signees, or, given that it was penned by Caillois and figures mainly in his program-text, his alone.<sup>7</sup> If, as Surya suggests, Leiris had voiced his skepticism to this conspiratorial desire, and that Bataille would share some of his reticence, how does this alter our consideration of the Collège as a conspiracy? As a myth, the idea of conspiracy often proves alluring because it symbolizes a unity of purpose and of action, and yet the Collège seems to betray traces of disagreements and fissures even in the signing of the manifesto declaring its existence. These questions about the secret ambitions of the group can be even posed with relation to their practices. According to a poster announcing the 1937-1938 term's sessions, entry into the Collège's sessions was reserved for members, or for guests who had to be introduced by a current member, reproducing a practice of membership common to secret societies. Even the financial stipulations of the group gave it the air of a closed society: participants had to pay a monthly fee of 5 Francs, making it in practice an exclusive club. And yet this same closed society with pretensions to secrecy published its call to arms in the *NRF*. To what end does this act of revelation through publication complicate the meaning we should assign to the hidden, "dissimulated" conspiratorial intent at the heart of the Collège? As Michèle Richman has suggested, the legacy of the group itself seems to bear out some of these contradictions and questions: while researchers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean Wahl had made reference to it in the context of the French school of sociology, the Collège's very existence as a group was the subject of doubt and debate until 1979, when Denis Hollier's

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 321. We shall see in detail the differences of opinion between the three directors of the Collège in the second half of this chapter.

compilation brought together for the first time the different texts written under the auspices of the group.<sup>8</sup>

It is thus not simply the conspiratorial aspiration that lies at the heart of the Collège, but also many of the paradoxes that such a form of organization represents, and that have been at issue throughout this dissertation. In an essay originally published in 1991, Denis Hollier analyzes at length the often charged way in which critics have addressed the group's activities and ideologies as "ambiguous," "equivocal," or "ambivalent."<sup>9</sup> Characterizing the group in such a way effectively serves as a political accusation: even as the group criticized fascism's forms of social and political organization, some of its members advanced arguments that could be (and have been) interpreted as admiring of fascism. Most infamously, in "Le Vent d'hiver" Caillois called for the rejuvenation of society through the "elimination of its waste": in attempting to argue for a moral elite purged of its unwanted and undesirable elements, Caillois's rhetoric brushes up against fascist rhetoric of a society purified of its corrupting communities.<sup>10</sup> As Hollier notes, critical references to ambiguity and ambivalence are always colored in a negative shade: to both the detractors and the supporters of the Collège, such equivocalities always mean a masking, a hidden sympathy for fascism instead of an open opposition. But, Hollier argues, the Collège's ambivalences can ultimately be traced back to their interest in the sacred, which

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<sup>8</sup> See Richman's *Sacred Revolutions*, 2-3. She notes that the group's legacy was shrouded in so much mystery that following the publication of his book, Hollier was once accused of having invented the group.

<sup>9</sup> Denis Hollier, "De l'équivoque entre littérature et politique," in *Les Dépossédés. Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux, Sartre* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993), 109-130.

<sup>10</sup> In "Le Vent d'hiver," Caillois says that "une société comme un organisme doit savoir éliminer ses déchets" (341). Hollier notes that many of the ambiguities surrounding Bataille's relationship to fascism stem from his 1933 text "La structure psychologique du fascisme." See "De l'équivoque," 109-111.

always manifests itself in two poles: attraction/repulsion, pure/impure, respect/transgression.<sup>11</sup> Thus to deny the existence of these ambivalences, to assert unequivocally that the Collège was either repulsed by or attracted to fascism, is to deny the very nature of the Collège.

I would further contend that the very form of the secret society generates its own series of ambivalences, a point that sociologies of the secret society have long highlighted. Part of this is due to what Georg Simmel and Marcel Mauss have both pinpointed as the relative nature of secrecy implied in these groups: the secret society can be defined by the clandestine nature of its rituals, membership, or ideology, but its existence is still well-known in the society at large.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the defining features of the secret society, its rites, hierarchies, and initiations, are intended to insure on an internal level the cohesion and solidarity of the group, but the guiding principle of secrecy entails that its external function is always one of exclusion, of keeping the un-initiated at bay.<sup>13</sup> The practices of secret societies thus create their own set of ambivalences, structured around the poles of secrecy/knowledge and inclusion/exclusion, onto which is projected even further confusion from the outside as these groups are considered conspiracies precisely because they exclude and occlude. The act of defining the particular function of secret societies and conspiracies within the context of the Collège's endeavor must then take into account the ways in which such social forms already imply a complicated and often ambivalent mission.

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<sup>11</sup> The Collège's members were largely influenced by the French sociologist Robert Hertz, who argued that the sacred was composed of a "right" pole (the site of attraction and authority) and a "left" pole (the site of horror and disgust). In Hertz's reading this bifurcation is never purely symmetrical, with the right pole being accentuated at the expense of the left. As Jean Jamin argues, part of Bataille and Leiris's interest in sociology came from their desire to explore in depth the left pole of the sacred. See his "Un sacré collège," 20-24.

<sup>12</sup> On this point, see Mauss's *Manuel d'éthnographie* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1967), 129-131.

<sup>13</sup> On this point, see Georg Simmel's "The Secret and the Secret Society," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1950).

This definitional challenge is made even more problematic by the existence of another group with pretensions to secrecy that the members of the Collège participated in: *Acéphale*, a group whose practices remain shrouded in mystery due to the continued respect for the vows of silence taken by its former members. Founded in 1937 by Bataille, *Acéphale* represented a movement away from the militancy of Bataille and Andre Breton's anti-fascist group *Contre-Attaque* studied in chapter 2. Rather than advocating mass protests in the street, *Acéphale* emphasized secret rites and rituals, aiming to use its very existence as a weapon against society. Bataille had borrowed the name for the group from his own journal *Acéphale*, a christening intended to represent one of its central ideas: like the paradox of a body without a head, the secret society was intended to be a community without a leader, a group that grappled with power but which left no trace.<sup>14</sup> The mystery that cloaks *Acéphale* as a secret society poses a certain difficulty for scholars researching its activities, a conundrum that is true to an even greater extent for the literary scholar, for part of *Acéphale*'s mystique is precisely what Marina Galletti, citing Jean-Luc Nancy, terms an "absence d'oeuvre."<sup>15</sup> While the journal *Acéphale* published articles primarily focused on German philosophy (and which have been compiled in various editions of Bataille's work), a veritable textual silence has engulfed *Acéphale* the group. What little is known about its activities comes from a few former participants who have broken their vows of silence and from the meticulous reconstruction of its rituals by Marina Galletti in her collection of letters and documents Bataille wrote around *Acéphale*. From these hints, some

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Masson's famous image of the "homme acéphale" depicts a standing man (in the style of da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*), decapitated, with a skull covering his groin. Masson's drawing first appeared on the cover of the journal *Acéphale* in 1936.

<sup>15</sup> Marina Galletti, "Le Roi du bois," in Georges Bataille, *L'apprenti sorcier: Du cercle communiste démocratique à Acéphale*, ed. Marina Galletti (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1999), 57. Nancy has written on the notion of the "inoperative community" in Bataille in *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1982). See also Maurice Blanchot's response *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988).

of Acéphale's rituals have been discovered: meetings in a forest near an "arbre foudroyé," followed by group meditations and reflections; the commemoration of the anniversary of the decapitation of Louis XVI; and the refusal to shake hands with anti-Semites.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most famous among their projects was the eventually aborted plan for a human sacrifice: according to avant-garde lore, the ritual never took place because everyone wanted to be the victim, yet no one was willing to play the role of the executioner.<sup>17</sup>

The motivation behind these rituals and rites was the desire on the part of Bataille to found a religion, one which, given Bataille's Nietzschean leanings, would represent above all a paradox.<sup>18</sup> Acéphale's religious nature was intended to be of piece with its name: a religion without a God, a group without a leader. There is, then, a link between Acéphale's religiosity and the Collège's interest in reinvigorating the sacred in modern life, suggesting a certain continuity or contiguity between the two groups. Scholars have often insisted on this connection, seeing the Collège as the "exterior" activity of Acéphale's secret rites or perhaps its "political" side.<sup>19</sup> This is an understandable claim, given the rule of silence that was imposed upon Acéphale, and taking into consideration the fact that the creation of the Collège marks as well the end of the journal *Acéphale*. The absolute secrecy of Acéphale thus becomes the relative secrecy of the Collège, implying an interpretative shift from the secret society to the conspiracy. But the assertion that the Collège and Acéphale are essentially two parts of the same movement is also

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<sup>16</sup> See *L'apprenti sorcier*, 361-362, as well as Galletti's introduction to the edition.

<sup>17</sup> Surya, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Surya cites Bataille's own avowal in the 1950s of his desire to found a religion in a "paradoxical form." See his *Georges Bataille*, 301.

<sup>19</sup> See Marina Galletti's "Histoire d'une société secrète (Le chapitre biffé de la *Somme athéologique*)" in *Writing in Context: French Literature, Theory and the Avant-Gardes*, Tiina Arppe, Timo Kaitaro and Kai Mikkonen, eds. (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies), 75; and Francis Marmande, *Georges Bataille politique* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985), 236.

not without its complications, beginning with the fact that not all the members of the Collège participated in *Acéphale* (indeed, some such as Leiris showed great reticence toward Bataille's project). Moreover, while not overtly "political" (in the sense of manifest organization), *Acéphale* was still intended as a response to the rise of fascism: Bataille's particular interest in a revival of the sacred was inspired in no small part by the ways in which the Nazis were able to mobilize and energize crowds in a fevered frenzy. For many critics, *Acéphale* represents the limit of the idea of the avant-garde as secret society which we explored in chapter 2, one in which the written text is abandoned in favor of shared, silent experiences.<sup>20</sup> But (like the Collège) it also announced its formation through a journal. If *Acéphale* symbolizes (for certain critics at least) the ultimate "true" secret society, one shrouded in mystery and silence, how are we then to understand the Collège's stated goal of creating a vast conspiracy through its activities?

This definitional tension between the secret society and the conspiracy was one to which the members of the Collège were well attuned. Part of the work that Bataille and Caillois undertook at the Collège was to use science as a means of establishing a system of definitions and concepts that would shape the practice of the group. Their intention was not simply a matter of asserting that the Collège was a conspiracy or a secret society but of creating a vocabulary and analytic framework for addressing those notions, establishing their practice through a definitional rigor that was engaged in the issues of the present moment. This endeavor was perhaps most abundantly clear in the paper that Bataille and Caillois devoted exclusively to secret societies,

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in his *Poétique des groupes littéraires* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), Vincent Kaufman describes Bataille as wanting to incarnate "la limite du surréalisme" (94) and describes *Acéphale* as "la communauté s'arrachant au livre, à l'écriture, c'est la communauté s'occultant pour se soustraire à l'ombre portée par le Livre" (99).

presented at the Collège in March 1938, and which can provide a basis for understanding the specificity of both Acéphale and the Collège.

The lecture, entitled “Confréries, ordres, sociétés secrètes, églises,” is, in the words of Denis Hollier, an “exercise in ventriloquism” (217): originally intended for Caillois, who was unable to participate due to illness, Bataille spoke on behalf of his colleague, using his notes, while adding a framework that oriented the text. While Caillois’s observations focus on an abstract and general presentation of a sociological analysis of secret societies (in a schema owing much to the work of the anthropologist Georges Dumézil), Bataille’s addenda consistently place these remarks in the context of the crisis of late 1930s Europe. Throughout the paper Bataille insists on the idea of the secret society as a response to the growing militarization of European nations in the wake of fascism. Arguing that the vacuum of religious life created by the previous century’s political revolutions has led to a state of “national militarisms,” Bataille hammers away at the message of contemporariness: “à l’instant même où nous sommes...l’esprit militaire seul dicte le destin à des masses humaines” (223), “ce sujet trop actuel” (224), “une réalité qui menace aujourd’hui l’existence du monde actuel” (ibid.), “des réalités pesantes du monde actuel” (227), “l’horizon apparaît aujourd’hui à tous comme muré” (ibid.). As Hollier notes, the timing of this conference was crucial, since Bataille gave his speech a mere week after Nazi Germany had invaded Vienna at the Anschluss. Faced with the outright military success of Hitler, Bataille poses the secret society as a sort of refuge, a clandestine retreat that escapes the attention of the military.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hollier notes that this recalls the notion of mimesis and camouflage (explored notably by Caillois in his 1934 essay *La Mante religieuse*) since the hidden secret society hides in plain view, either for pure esthetics or for fooling its predators. See *Collège*, 221, as well as Hollier’s essay “Mimétisme et castration 1937” in *Les Dépossédés* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993) in which he notes that the Collège – where “l’affrontement prend la forme d’une subversion simulacrale” – essentially “plays dead” within society (70). See as well Joyce Cheng’s “Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis: Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin and Surrealism in the 1930s,” *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 16, n. 1 (January 2009), 61-86.



This insistence on the present moment as a moment of retreat, or contraction, reverses the normal relationship to history observed in the secret society in previous chapters. Whereas a paranoid view of the secret society focuses backwards on history, reconstructing the narrative leading up to the time of crisis, Bataille and Caillois's invocation of the secret society poses it as a potential response to history. As Bataille argues, "s'il existait une organisation religieuse virulente, neuve et incongrue des pieds à la tête, soutenue par un esprit incapable de composition servile, un homme pourrait encore apprendre – et retenir – qu'il existe autre chose à aimer que cette image à peine voilée de la nécessité pécuniaire qu'est la patrie en armes" (228). The use of the conditional – "un homme *pourrait* encore apprendre" – is telling: their secret society serves as something that both could create reality and does not yet exist, rather than a description of a present reality. Bataille insists upon this point: "Et s'il est vrai qu'une telle organisation ne peut en rien arrêter l'orage d'explosifs dans lequel il semble que nous sommes déjà entrés, sa présence dans le monde pourrait cependant être regardée dès maintenant comme le gage des victoires ultérieures de l'HOMME contre ses armes !" (ibid.). Bataille's notion of a secret society indicates how the Collège de Sociologie stands against, say, Céline or Aragon's paranoiac visions of history explained and caused by secret plots: here such a group is powerless against the current turbulent state of affairs, but its existence – its presence – "*could* be regarded" as a guarantee of future victories. This is not to say that Bataille's notion of the secret society is ahistorical; as we have seen, it is thoroughly rooted in the exigencies of contemporary events. Rather, elective communities or secret societies according to the Collège are (in Bataille's words) the means of coming to terms with and withstanding the "realities of the current world," the answer to the problem of a militarized, irreligious society.<sup>22</sup> But he also seems to imply that this sort of body still needs to come into existence, its potentiality still needs to be realized,

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<sup>22</sup> Bataille refers to secret societies as a "moyen" or a "réponse" three times in the space of one paragraph (229).

suggesting that the preexisting forms of the secret society, including those of intellectuals, from Acéphale and Contre-Attaque to surrealism, do not yet embody that possibility. In other words, part of the Collège's work, Bataille implies, must be to fashion such a form of social organization.

Following Bataille's opening exhortation concerning the secret society as a potential response to history, the "Confréries" speech follows two divergent paths, one following Caillois and the other Bataille. In the first trajectory, Bataille outlines Caillois's notes on elective communities, in which Caillois sketches four main characteristics of secret societies: first, they are a group within a larger group. Second, they are closed-off, creating boundaries that separate their members from the larger society. Third, their power comes from an association with a mysterious force that cannot be revealed to outsiders. Lastly, they have an activist or militant side, operating only during critical, often short periods of time.<sup>23</sup> Bataille underlines the importance in Caillois's notes of the idea of the secret society as primarily a function, in particular a rejuvenating function within a decadent society (236). It is not, then, secret societies that ought to be blamed for society's decline; rather, they come *after* periods of decadence, a means to regroup and refocus the energies of society. The notes have the purpose of establishing a definitional clarity that determines the specific value of such a group for its members (internal cohesion and contact with a mysterious power) and for the society at large (the rejuvenation of decadence). In this sense Bataille (through Caillois) suggests a critical separation of the notion of the secret society from the conspiracy theory: by establishing the limited functions of such groups, they argue against considerations that place it in the shadows of power.

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<sup>23</sup> In a letter to Bataille attached to his notes, Caillois notes the influence of Dumézil on his notion of the secret society, in particular the latter's *Le problème des Centaures* (1929) and *Flamen-Brahman* (1935). See *Le Collège de Sociologie*, 229-230, as well as Hollier's notes on the "Confréries" essay.

In the other path of the speech dedicated solely to Bataille's own thoughts, this separation between "secret society" and "conspiracy" is stressed through two important considerations. First, Bataille argues, as society evolves, so do secret societies, so that it is difficult for the groups that were initially political in nature to maintain their dynamism in the face of society's progressive stability. Freemasonry might have had a political energy in the eighteenth century, but any such vitality has been lost as it becomes less of an oppositional figure within society. Second and more important, understanding the function of secret societies entails a distinction between what Bataille terms "sociétés de complot" and a "société secrète purement existentielle" (240). Bataille makes this differentiation primarily in terms of function: conspiratorial societies ("sociétés de complot") exist solely in service of an (often political) action beyond their own existence, while existential secret societies ("sociétés secrètes existentielles") exist purely for their own being.<sup>24</sup> In other words, this distinction represents the difference between acting and being.

For Bataille, the distinction also implies a choice that must be made in favor of an existential secret society, for these organizations alone can come into contact with the totality of human existence: "une réalité existant pour elle-même, une réalité dans laquelle la recherche pure et simple de l'existence, la pure et simple volonté d'être compte indépendamment de tout but particulier" (241). Bataille seems to be pushing against a vision of the Collège as a conspiracy, with its activist mission of a sacred sociology as one such "but particulier." Bataille notes that it is almost "absurd" to imagine individuals gathering together for the sole purpose of existing, hence the attraction of a secret society: "Or la vertu profonde du principe même de la 'société

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<sup>24</sup> As Bataille mentions, the idea of "société de complot" comes from Marcel Mauss, and it figures in a letter Mauss wrote to Élie Halévy in 1936 in which he critiques the continuing conspiratorial forms of organization of the Communist Party. Hollier notes that the "existential" secret society is Bataille's own concept, owed in large part to his readings of German philosophy. See *Le Collège de Sociologie*, 240n1, 240n2, and 848.

secrète' consiste précisément en ceci qu'il constitue la seule négation radicale et opérante, la seule négation qui ne consiste pas seulement en phrases, de ce principe de la nécessité au nom duquel l'ensemble des hommes actuels collabore au gâchis de l'existence" (242). For Bataille, the existential secret society offers such an alluring means of response to crisis because it is a totality existing unto itself, and one whose resistance is assured because it is not limited to speech ("la seule négation qui ne consiste pas seulement en phrases").

Bataille's opposition of speech and action recalls Contre-Attaque's critique of traditional politics as hypocritical speech necessitating the clamoring response of the masses in the street. But he goes further here, insisting on a tripartite distinction between speech, action, and silence, one in which speech is seen as an impoverishment of action and an obvious corruption of silence. Bataille's interest in secret societies as organizations is that they resist what he terms the "détournements et...escroqueries véritables pratiquées par les formations politiques" (ibid.). This recalls the critiques leveled against fascism by Contre-Attaque but also participates in a larger critique of parliamentary democracy in the 1930s, one that asserted that politics implies a con job predicated on a manipulation of speech.<sup>25</sup> A truly effective secret society serves as a powerful but silent rebuttal: enshrouded in silence, its existence is circumscribed by an absence of language. Thus Bataille can proclaim: "Il est clair que le pouvoir ne sera pas retenu par les bavards" (243). But there is a certain irony, or at least yet another ambivalence, at work here: the critique of the "bavards" comes at the end of a long public conference, one in which Bataille literally speaks on behalf of a silent colleague. Moreover, the use of the future tense ("le pouvoir ne sera pas retenu") suggests that the potentiality must come into being: silence might be able to

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<sup>25</sup> As Hollier suggests, the Collège can be situated within Zeev Sternhell's formulation of 1930s politics as "ni droite, ni gauche," with the critique of fascism often simultaneously taking the form of an attack against democracy. See *Le Collège de Sociologie*, 18-20, as well his essay "De l'équivoque."

stand against political speech, but the conditions for that silence – the creation of this existential secret society – must still come into being, must still be defined.

Bataille himself concludes this call to community by noting that his address might seem out of place in a sociological paper: “Je n’ignore pas tout ce que ceci a de malsonnant. Je sais que je me suis écarté des limites que devrait se donner un exposé de sociologie. Mais je dois dire en toute simplicité que ces limites me paraissent arbitraires” (243). “Malsonnant” in the sense of propriety: the limits of sociology, with its division between objective research and engaged action, appear too constraining for Bataille. Far too often in sociology, he argues, a lack of decision and of action risk shaping research and investigation to such an extent that the eventual results demonstrate nothing more than “un vague reflet de l’esprit neutre” (ibid.). But “malsonnant” also in its etymological sense, of *sounding bad*: the very action of speech necessarily sounds bad against the demands of silence. Bataille’s speech attempts to define the Collège’s particular view of the secret society, one grounded in the exigencies of the present, oriented toward the future, partisan rather than neutral. But it also highlights the difficulties inherent to defining the Collège’s mission as a secret society, and suggests that that definitional work still needed to be done. For Bataille, such a group can only be seen at that moment as a potentiality, a response to a critical situation, and one whose strength can only be derived from its imposition of silence as a response to speech and politics. But to come into being, the group must first be defined, an act that, for the Collège, will entail a passage through texts, not just the manifesto, but also the program-texts and lectures that make up the group’s activities.

### **The Secret Societies of “Pour un Collège de Sociologie”**

In “De l’équivoque entre littérature et politique,” Denis Hollier observes that the question of the ambiguity of disciplinary boundaries frequently manifests itself in discussions of the

Collège, in particular the distinction between literature and politics. Literature, it is often asserted, can dabble in ambiguities, whereas politics must be unambiguous: to be ambiguously anti-fascist is, in the end, not to be anti-fascist enough. And yet this division between literature and politics is, Hollier argues, one that the authors of the 1930s would have resisted, as evidenced by their constant exploration of the nuances of the ambivalent: “leur passion de l'équivoque exigeait précisément des conditions qui suspendent le partage du politique et du littéraire.”<sup>26</sup> But if it is true that the boundary between politics and literature was of little importance to the members of the Collège, an equivalent disciplinary division between science and literature imposed a greater sense of respect. Caillois, for example, insisted to Jean Paulhan that the Collège was a sort of adieu to literature: “Vous savez, je ne suis pas écrivain, je m'intéresse seulement d'avoir une action.”<sup>27</sup> For its participants, the rigors of the sociological method were intended to change the course of the avant-garde's reliance on literature as a means of exploration and transformation.<sup>28</sup> Recent critical considerations of the Collège by Michèle Richman and Tiina Arppe have seemed to confirm the disciplinary division between science and literature: perhaps in an effort to compensate for the ways in which sociology has neglected the Collège, these reassessments have highlighted the ways in which the group ought to be understood within the context of the French sociological school begun by Emile Durkheim.<sup>29</sup> But as Vincent Debaene has recently demonstrated, the birth of ethnography in the 1920s and 1930s

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<sup>26</sup> Hollier, “De l'équivoque,” 118. Hollier primarily addresses Zeev Sternhell's favoring of political texts over works of literature in formulating his theory of French fascism as a movement of “neither left nor right.”

<sup>27</sup> Letter from November 5, 1937. Quoted in Laurence Brisset, *La NRF de Paulhan* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 140.

<sup>28</sup> Caillois, for example, proposed that literature was just a degradation of myth, stories that are told for the purposes of escape but that fail to shape human existence in the way that communal myths can.

<sup>29</sup> See Michèle Richman's *Sacred Revolutions*; Michael Richardson's “Sociology on a Razor's Edge: Configurations of the Sacred at the College of Sociology,” *Theory Culture Society* 9 (1992): 27-44; and Tiina Arppe's “Sorcerer's Apprentices and the ‘Will to Figuration’: The Ambiguous Heritage of the Collège de Sociologie,” *Theory Culture Society* 26 (2009): 117-144.

was often imbricated with the field of literature and literary studies. The figure of the ethnographer appealed to authors because he appeared an engaged, serious, and devoted *savant*, and ethnographers frequently made appeals to the literary tradition.<sup>30</sup> To insist on just one discipline neglects the ambivalence of the project as a whole: for while it is true that several of the Collège's members, such as Caillois and Leiris, did have a sociological or ethnological training, they counted among their ranks several former surrealists, literary editors, and philosophers. And when it was time to publish the manifesto declaring their existence, the choice of publication— the *Nouvelle revue française* — was not a sociological journal, but a literary one.

The three essays that make up the dossier that was published alongside “Pour un Collège de Sociologie” in the *NRF* demonstrate how the Collège's attempt to break with literature through the secret society proved to be a problematic gesture. In each of these papers the question of the secret group is invoked at some point, frequently in relation to both politics and literature. If, as we have seen, part of the work of the Collège is to call into being a secret society, to create the future group that will stand as a mode of resistance against the violence of war and the rise of fascism, the question of *how* this secret society will be fashioned becomes one of primary importance. As Martin Puchner has argued, one of the central tasks of the manifesto is to call into being a desired, often ideal, reality; as a genre, it employs certain literary and rhetorical strategies to shape its readership in the aim of changing history.<sup>31</sup> The complexity of the Collège's *NRF* dossier (as compared to Breton's manifestos, for example) is that it does not offer just one text, but rather a group manifesto and three “program-texts” meant to illustrate

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<sup>30</sup> Vincent Debaene, *L'Adieu au voyage: L'ethnologie française entre science et littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010). See especially chapters 1 and 2 for the context of the science-literature relationship during the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>31</sup> See Puchner's *Poetry of the Revolution*.

and expand upon the ideas contained within the manifesto. As we shall see, the three texts propose differing conceptions of the secret society that indicate certain paradoxes and limits on conceiving of a secret collective practice in the context of the Collège de Sociologie. It is not just the form of the secret society that changes from one author to the next, but also the manner in which they represent it, and these choices of representation go right to the heart of the complicated relationship between sociology and literature in the Collège.

In “L’Apprenti sorcier,” the opening text to the *NRF* dossier, Bataille expresses his hope, as suggested by the title, that the Collège’s study of the sacred would become a contagious force capable of taking up its own practitioners in its movement. The guiding message of the essay is the observation that man’s modern existence has been reduced to a partial state, where the pursuit of needs takes precedence over a total existence, what Bataille calls becoming “un homme entier” (305). If the thrust of Bataille’s argument is metaphysical – that existence has become a state of suffering – the metaphors are often anatomical: the reduction of man’s total existence is a sort of “mutilation” or a lung atrophied by tuberculosis: “La phtisie qui détruit les bronches sans provoquer de souffrance est sans doute une des maladies les plus pernicieuses... Le plus grand des maux qui frappent les hommes est peut-être la réduction de leur existence à l’organe servile” (ibid.). But the theme of virility that has often been at issue with the representation of secret societies is here only manifest through its absence: for Bataille, physical illness alludes to an incomplete existence, a mutilation. This mutilation is most apparent in the three domains where the search for totality is most often pursued: *science*, since the scientific pursuit limits itself to will to knowledge; *art*, since fiction abandons reality in order to pursue lies and fantasies; and *politics*, since the world inevitably forces man to renounce his dreams in recognizing the limits of his action. The “man of fiction,” in particular, can try to overcome his



limits by placing his fiction in the service of some other cause, but Bataille critiques this attempt at committed literature by noting that once art serves some exterior reality, it becomes “ornamental,” what he terms the “reflets ennuyeux d’un monde fragmentaire” (310). True transformation could come through action, but only if that action was not circumscribed by the limits of reality.

For Bataille, the problem is eventually distilled in the question of the poverty of myths in modern life. In order to feel his total existence, man needs to be *seduced* by a larger myth: “Et de même que la virilité se lie à l’attrait d’un corps nu, l’existence pleine se lie à toute image qui suscite de l’espoir et de l’effroi. L’ETRE AIMÉ dans ce monde dissous est devenu la seule puissance qui ait gardé la vertu de rendre à la chaleur de la vie” (314). What Bataille terms “the true world of lovers” is the reality created through the sacred communication between two lovers who lose themselves in the erotic act.<sup>32</sup> The discovery and choice of the loved one depends to a large extent on luck (“un *ensemble de hasards*,” 318), which is Bataille’s point: luck and chance thwart all attempts at teleology, creating an existence where life itself is uncertain and at risk. For Bataille, true existence only comes when life itself is in play, when the threat of death is assumed. Situations such as these allow myths to take shape, with the value of myth coming from the fact that it moves individuals: “Le mythe est peut-être fable mais cette fable est placée à l’opposé de la fiction si l’on regarde le peuple qui la danse, qui l’agit, et dont elle est la *vérité vivante*” (322-323, italics in original). The myth that Bataille wishes to create differs from art, and more specifically from fiction, in that it is *lived*, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But if myth as fable can be distinguished from fiction, it is also due to its complicated relationship to

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<sup>32</sup> Milo Sweedler notes that this conception of the sacred as a communication between lovers owes a great deal to Bataille’s intellectual and personal relationship with Laure (Colette Peignot). See his *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), chapter 4.

teleological narratives. Myth is made up of the “ensemble des hasards mythiques” that make up a community, but it also helps to impose itself on that same community: “le mythe entre dans l’existence humaine comme une force exigeant que la réalité *inférieure* se soumette à son empire” (324, italics in original). Myth and fiction thus distinguish themselves through their relative abilities to impose meaning: while fiction offers a set narrative of events that leaves nothing to chance (and therefore nothing to risk), myth offers itself up to chance, which paradoxically gives it more power to impose itself on a community.

In the last section of his essay, in which Bataille explains the reference to the sorcerer’s apprentice, secrecy’s relationship to both fiction and myth comes to the fore. The creation of a myth implies some of the same techniques as the creation of art, but due to the power of the sacred, only myth entails a certain rigor: “les exigences de l’invention mythologique sont seulement plus rigoureuses” (325). The “sorcerer’s apprentice,” as opposed to the artist, must respect this rigor, and in particular the demand of secrecy: “le secret, dans le domaine où [l’apprenti sorcier] s’avance, n’est pas moins nécessaire à ses étranges démarches qu’il ne l’est aux transports de l’érotisme” (325). The figure of the sorcerer’s apprentice in the context of the Collège came from a critique of the group by the philosopher Alexandre Kojève, who suggested that the group’s members would end up being enchanted by their own dabbling in secret practices, and it often serves an effective summary of Bataille’s post-Contre Attaque endeavors. However, as seen in chapter 2, the invocation of magic and sorcery was part of a longer tradition of defining the work of the avant-garde from surrealism to Contre-Attaque: sorcery appeals to the avant-garde because it implies a secret, transformative practice. Bataille’s break from his avant-garde literary and political predecessors was perhaps less absolute than it may first appear, in that he uses a similar framework for discussing the collective practices of the Collège. But this is not

to imply an absolute equivalence between the Collège and the preceding avant-garde movements: whereas for Breton the use of magic has an intentional quality – Contre-Attaque means to direct its forces against fascism – Bataille suggests that a true contact with the sacred remains unpredictable, capable of sweeping up its practitioners by its force.

For Bataille, the value of the secret society comes precisely from its contact with the forces of sorcery and magic: “La ‘société secrète’ est précisément le nom de la réalité sociale que ces démarches composent. Mais cette expression romanesque ne doit pas être entendue, comme il est d’usage, dans le sens vulgaire de ‘société de complot.’ Car le secret touche à la réalité constitutive de l’existence qui séduit, non à quelque action contraire à la sûreté de l’État” (326). As in the analysis offered in his “Confréries” speech, Bataille again distinguishes between an “existential” secret society and a “conspiratorial” secret society, but he here adds a further qualification: the “normal” or “vulgar” usage of “secret society” is qualified as “romanesque,” effectively siding the conspiratorial society with the realm of fiction and of art. A conspiracy functions under the same difficulties as the pursuit of art: it becomes subservient to another cause, to another reality, rather than existing in and of itself. In Bataille’s line of thinking, such forms of the secret society degrade myth into literature; they are something to be followed, rather than lived. This does not mean that Bataille denies the possibility of political consequence to “sociétés de complot,” but (as in the “Confréries” speech), he again stresses the importance of existence as opposed to speech or action: “Même s’il est vrai que la répercussion soit décisive et transforme la face du monde (alors que l’action des partis se perd dans le sable mouvant des paroles qui se contredisent), sa répercussion politique ne peut être que le résultat de l’existence” (326). The deliberate actions of political parties – the intentional narratives they attempt to create – can only be lost within their use of words. Contradictory speech, described through the

metaphor of quicksand, subsumes all political action, making politics only a meager, fragmented part of the totality of the human existence.

The association that Bataille establishes between conspiracies and fiction (in particular, the committed literature of the man of fiction) can be read as a critique of narrative: conspiracies attempt to take away the element of chance from political events, just as conspiratorial narratives impose a teleological view upon history. Yet what is ultimately left unsaid in Bataille's essay is precisely *how* the seductive nature of a secret society can be achieved through the Collège's work. Bataille attempts what he terms "la description méthodique de l'expérience à tenter," but the very act of putting that experience into words would have the effect of denigrating that experience. In this sense, Bataille's choice to conclude his essay by defining his terms demonstrates his own attempt at resisting the pitfalls of simple speech: the secret society he dramatizes through the image of the lovers cannot be the novelistic image one normally has of conspiratorial organizations.<sup>33</sup> If normal politics is normally associated with contradictory speech, Bataille's decision to explain his own terms demonstrates how he understands the politics of the Collège: through distinction and classification, the "existential" secret society can take shape. And, as Bataille concludes his essay with this definition, he then moves into silence, where such secret societies are meant to dwell.

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Michel Leiris's contribution to the *NRF* dossier, "Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne," was a presentation he had given the year before at the Collège, an essay that would prove to be his sole

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Connor has analyzed the tension that exists in Bataille between communication and silence, situating it within a mystical tradition that finds difficulty in using language to explain an intimate experience. While Connor does not focus on the texts Bataille wrote for the Collège, he notes that Bataille often points to his own particular use of language as a way of seemingly compensating for the need to abandon silence. See Connor's *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), chapter 2, especially 48-52.

presentation to the group. Of the Collège's triumvirate, Leiris was the only one who had actual experience in ethnographic fieldwork, having served as the official secretary-archivist to Marcel Griaule's 1931-33 Dakar-Djibouti expedition. That experience led to the 1934 publication of his personal ethnographic journal, *L'Afrique fantôme*, a text that created a generic hybrid of anthropological study and personal diary.<sup>34</sup> "Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne" treads a similar fine line, attempting a sociological study of the sacred, but one tied exclusively to the first person and his intimate experiences. Or as Leiris puts it in the first lines of the text: "Qu'est-ce, pour moi, que le *sacré*? Plus exactement: en quoi consiste *mon sacré*?" (102, italics in the original). But the experience of the sacred is still tied to a community for Leiris, as he explores the rituals and groups he and his brothers formed during their childhood in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. In this sense, the question becomes not so much "what is *my* sacred?" but "what was *our* sacred?"<sup>35</sup> The purpose of the essay is to rediscover and analyze through remembrance those moments when the sacred manifested itself to Leiris and his brothers, often in mysterious ways. In the organization of the text, Leiris demonstrates his previous training in ethnology and anthropology: he classifies his objects of analysis as the "idols," "temples," and "sacred spaces" of his childhood, moving steadily from objects (such as the salamander heater) to the rooms in which they are located before finally arriving outdoors.<sup>36</sup> Each of these items and sites are studied by Leiris in order to explain how the sacred's ability to at once attract and repulse manifested itself in the daily life of his childhood.

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<sup>34</sup> Vincent Debaene argues that *L'Afrique fantôme* reveals Leiris's experience of the rhetorical and anthropological failure of ethnography, one that highlights the loss of an idea of solidarity between literature and science in the attempt at understanding man. See his *L'Adieu au voyage*, 271-307.

<sup>35</sup> On the use of the first-person plural in the essay, see Hollier's introductory notes, in *Le Collège de Sociologie*, 101-102.

<sup>36</sup> Seán Hand notes that Leiris represents "the best Maussian tradition" of ethnographic analysis: "[his] paragraphs build into a card-index of the linguistic, heterogeneous and psycho-sexual formation of the self within a specific cultural situation." See Hand's *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63.

Even in the most banal situations, Leiris notes, the ambivalent nature of the sacred comes through, divided between its “official” or “right-handed” side and the “clandestine” or “left-handed” side. The right pole of the sacred, as represented by his parents’ bedroom, imposes itself as an established authority, while the left pole, embodied by the bathroom, represents the illicit yet nevertheless charged side of the sacred.<sup>37</sup> The bathroom in particular sets the stage for the first appearance of the figure of the secret society in Leiris’s text, when he recounts the memory of times spent there with one of his brothers:

C’était dans cet endroit que nous nous sentions le plus complices, tandis que nous fomentions des complots et que nous élaborions toute une mythologie quasi secrète, reprise chaque soir, parfois mise au net sur des cahiers, aliment de la part la plus proprement imaginative de notre vie. Des animaux soldats, jockeys, aviateurs civils ou militaires, lancés dans des compétitions guerrières, sportives ou dans des intrigues policières. Ténébreuses machinations politiques avec essais de coup d’État, meurtres, enlèvements. (106)

Leiris goes on to list the various stories he and his brother invented, including “projets de constitution,” “intrigues sentimentales,” and “beaucoup de combats, de luttes farouches.” As with many scenes in the essay, the banality of the event is belied by the manifestation of the sacred for Leiris, which he connotes through his very descriptions. The repetition of the event, suggested by the use of the imperfect and the insistence on “chaque soir,” coupled with the incomplete sentences describing the stories told by the brothers, suggests a sacred ritual whose

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<sup>37</sup> See chapter 4 of Sweedler’s *The Dismembered Community* for a comparative analysis of the bathroom as a sacred space in both Bataille and Leiris’s works.

own description evades a complete retelling.<sup>38</sup> Of all the representations of secret societies in the *NRF* dossier, Leiris's stands out due to its clear inscription in a narrative, or to be more precise, two levels of narrative. On one level, the brothers invent "complots" and heroic stories of "ténébreuses machinations politiques" which, Leiris remembers, are all "dûment consigné[es] dans nos cahiers, sous forme de récits, de tableaux, de plans, de croquis, avec tables récapitulatives et arbres généalogiques" (106-107). The brothers tell (and retell) their made-up stories, and then preserve them in notebooks, "sous forme de récits"; the secret society is just one imagined element of this larger, more complicated mythology that the brothers recount to each other. The sacred makes its mark on the scene through the repeated use of the imagination of the brothers ("aliment de la part la plus proprement imaginative de notre vie"): they create stories of conspiracies, and the writing of the stories becomes an integral part of their ritual.

But the ritual between Leiris and his brother, those moments when they would feel the most complicit, is itself framed within a second, larger narrative, namely the posterior commentary on their practices by Leiris himself in the essay. Here, the secret society does not belong to the fictional stories that the two brothers tell each other but rather serves as a descriptor for the very activities that Leiris and his brother participated in. This secret society, the one formed by Leiris and his brother, receives further comment:

Outre la série de légendes que nous inventions et notre panthéon de héros, ce qui, de ces longs moments passés dans les W.-C., était peut-être le plus nettement marqué par le sacré, c'est *la clandestinité même de nos relations*. Il est entendu que le reste de la famille savait que nous étions là, mais, derrière la porte fermée, on ignorait ce que nous racontions. Il y avait dans ce que nous faisions quelque chose de plus ou moins défendu,

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Jamin suggests as well that this verbal choice of the imperfect can be interpreted as Leiris's attempt at distancing his text from the traditional ethnographic essay, normally written in the present. See "Un sacré collègue," 24.

qui nous attirait d'ailleurs des réprimandes lorsque nous restions trop longtemps enfermés. (107, emphasis added)

The sacred, then, manifests itself most clearly through the very clandestine nature of the secret society between Leiris and his brother: delimited by a set space (inside the bathroom), shut off from the rest of the family outside of the closed door, the ritual assumes a sacred character because it is secret. Or, to use Leiris's terms, "quasi-secret": the family knows that they are in the bathroom, but they do not know precisely what they are doing. This is the relative secrecy that Mauss and Simmel identify at the heart of the secret society, or, as Caillois put it in his notes for the "Confréries" lecture: "La confrérie n'est pas 'secrète' au sens propre du terme: ses manifestations sont publiques et l'on sait quels sont ses membres" (232). Leiris himself compares this to a "maison des hommes de quelque île de l'Océanie" whose purpose is the transmission of myths from one initiate to another, "de bouche à bouche et de génération à génération" (ibid.). The sole purpose of the secret society between the brothers is to exist and to propagate its own myths; the simple fact of their being there, clandestinely, imbues the scene with a certain power. For Leiris, it represents "cette chose *éminemment* sacrée qu'est toute espèce de pacte" (108, italics mine). The imminence of the sacred even transforms the space, turning the bathroom into a sort of "caverne" or "antre" close to underground, hidden powers. Against the metaphorical space of Bataille's lovers' chamber (or the winter refuge that will appear in Caillois's contribution), Leiris posits the real-life space of the bathroom as a site close to underground, hidden powers, and capable of putting its residents in touch with the sacred.

Within Leiris's account there are thus two sorts of secret societies: the fictional ones who take on the character of the sacred due to their repeated telling, effectively becoming myths between the brothers; and the one that he and his brother make a pact into. In this way Leiris



almost seems to gesture towards Bataille's distinction between "sociétés de complot" and "société secrète existentielle."<sup>39</sup> Leiris seems to privilege the second form, actually analyzing the ways in which the "embryonic secret society" ("embryon d'une société secrète," 108) that he and his brother formed took on the nature of the sacred, while the stories themselves that the brothers told are given short shrift. In this way, Leiris seems close to Bataille, seeing the "société de complot" as "romanesque" – indeed, the *complots* here are actual childhood stories termed "intrigues" or "récits" by their author – while the myth of the "existential" secret society is deemed "imminently" sacred. But Leiris does not then subscribe to Bataille's call for a rule of silence: his conference reveals all of the inner workings of the secret society of his youth. Leiris's work is in many ways a demythologization: he explains the experience of the sacred, the ways in which it manifested itself to him at a young age, but he does not attempt to remythologize.<sup>40</sup> Thus not only is Leiris's secret society a strictly first-person experience, it also remains relegated to the past. The experiences between the brothers are always and clearly demonstrated to be the naïve undertakings of two youths. This creates a complication for our understanding of the role of Leiris's essay in the *NRF* dossier, for he does not attempt to call into being any sort of secret society, nor does he even prescribe activities for the Collège. Leiris suggests that the ties that connected him to his brother are typical of any group with a pact at its foundation, but his description only outlines what *was* rather than what *could be*.

This hesitation on Leiris's part may stem from the fact that, for him, the most valuable form of the secret society is to be found not necessarily in political action, or in communal forms of organization, but rather in the experience of language. For if the first part of "Le sacré dans la

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<sup>39</sup> These distinctions are not mentioned by Leiris. "Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne" was presented to the Collège several months before the "Confréries" conference in which Bataille defines these two notions.

<sup>40</sup> Seán Hand distinguishes between Leiris's "appeal to honest scrutiny" and Bataille's "enthusiasm for the violent dynamic of myth." See his *Michel Leiris*, 65.

vie quotidienne” focuses on objects and spaces where the sacred reveals itself, the second part of the essay is concerned with what Leiris deems “faits de langage,” what he describes as “mots par eux-mêmes riches en prolongements, ou mots mal entendus ou mal lus et déclenchant brusquement une sorte de vertige au moment où l’on s’aperçoit qu’ils ne sont pas ce qu’on aurait cru jusque-là” (113). These “faits de langage” are thus sounds or understandings that lead to associations or dissociations from language’s normal meaning. Leiris gives several examples of these “faits”: the name “Rebecca” whose very sound evokes something at once hard and soft, or the imagined exoticism of “Bakouta!,” the made-up war cry used by his one of his brothers. The introduction into these new realms of meaning comes as an initiation: the words take on the “valeur magique d’un mot de passe ou d’un abracadabra,” containing a secret meaning that only the initiated can understand (115). For Leiris, then, the value of a secret society lies not with either narrative (the conspiracies of his mythologies) nor with silence (the clandestine meetings behind closed bathroom doors), but rather in the initiation into language itself.

Leiris asserts that language can function as the literal password into a secret society of knowledge, and in this sense he would recall Breton’s invocations of the practice of poetry as an initiation into surrealism. But Leiris distinguishes himself from his former surrealist comrades’ collective practices by insisting on the individual, first-person experience of language: “Outre ces mots qui – si l’on peut dire – me parlaient par eux-mêmes, il est d’autres choses de langage qui m’apportèrent la vague perception de cette espèce de déviation ou décalage qui caractérise encore pour moi le passage de l’état commun à un état plus privilégié, plus cristallin, plus singulier, le glissement d’un état profane à un état sacré” (115). Beyond the repeated insistence on the *moi* in this passage, Leiris also argues here for a distinction between a “common” state – understood at once as something banal but also shared – and the sacred state, described above all

as “singular” experience. In this way, argues Denis Hollier, the transition within the essay from sacred spaces and objects to sacred language marks a more significant turning-point that will take Leiris towards his autobiographical project *La Règle du jeu*, a shift that also demonstrates a move away from a secret society of language to language as an idiolect, an individual experience.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Leiris suggests that these “minimal discoveries” (“de très minimes découvertes”) are almost unpredictable in nature: it is only by misreading them or not hearing them correctly that he is able to grasp their meaning. As such, any attempt to put into practice such a use of language, to make a *mot d’ordre* out of a *mot de passe*, would seem almost destined to fail.

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Within the progression of the program-texts of the *NRF* dossier, Bataille’s text ultimately gestures towards the silence of the secret society, and Leiris’s resists any attempt to move beyond a personal, unpredictable secret society of language. Roger Caillois’s contribution, “Le Vent d’hiver,” was presented last of the three essays, and this text perhaps best illustrates his call in the manifesto for the creative transformation of the Collège into a conspiracy. Caillois argues in his essay that the current critical state of society has resulted from a progressive crisis of individualism dating back to the Romantic era. According to Caillois, as the individual, and in particular the artist, has become more and more removed from society, he has increasingly denied the social rules of attraction and repulsion which characterize the sacred. The artist may attempt to combat society through art, but this struggle can only be illusory: the challenge to society, the feeling of liberty assumed by the artist, is either incapable of turning into action or is

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<sup>41</sup> See Hollier’s introductory notes to “Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne,” 99-102. See as well Jean Jamin’s “Un sacré collège.”

nothing but a form of escapism. This realization, for Caillois, gives rise to the need to move from the “profanation” of the Romantics to “sacralization”:

Aussi le moment est-il venu de faire comprendre à qui ne s’y refuse pas, par intérêt ou par peur, que les individus vraiment décidés à entreprendre la lutte, à une échelle infime au besoin, mais dans la voie efficace où leur tentative risque de devenir épidémique, doivent se mesurer avec la société sur son propre terrain et l’attaquer avec ses propres armes, c’est-à-dire en se constituant eux-mêmes en communauté. (333)

Here, and throughout the essay, Caillois, like Bataille, makes recourse to biological metaphors: the “epidemic” nature of this secondary society gains its strength from the fact it is smaller and denser than the society within which it hides, much like “un cancer au sein d’une structure plus labile et plus lâche” (337). But the biological sickness that Bataille diagnoses in “L’Apprenti sorcier” becomes in “Le Vent d’hiver” a target for the virile concentration of the elected community; the weakness of the body politic can only be corrected by a dense mass that works from within. Caillois insists upon this process of “sursocialization” through the idea of a society within society, a *mise-en-abyme* that attempts to sacralize to the greatest extent possible.

This link between virile resistance and community becomes especially apparent in the final pages of the essays, when the meaning of the title of Caillois’s text also becomes clear. In a rapturous conclusion Caillois comments on the processes of contraction and restriction that the formation of a secret society implies through an extended description of winter. Drawing on the works of Mauss, Dumézil, and in particular Granet, Caillois describes the season as one of intensity and retreat, when individuals remove themselves from society, and the sexes divide, in

order to channel and concentrate all vital energies.<sup>42</sup> Winter as a period for reflection clearly appealed to Caillois: as Laurent Jenny has noted, he returned to it in several texts at the end of the 1930s, drawn to the metaphorical value of the season.<sup>43</sup> In the final paragraphs of “Le Vent d’hiver,” the imminence of winter is presented in rich but abstract terms: “Le temps n’est plus à la clémence. Il s’élève présentement dans le monde un grand vent de subversion, un vent froid, rigoureux, arctique” (352). But winter is also a time that will persevere, wiping away the decadence of the current society: “Une mauvaise saison, peut-être une ère quaternaire – l’avance des glaciers – s’ouvre pour cette société démantelée sénile, à demi croulante” (ibid.). For Caillois, the winter wind announces a division between members of the society, a culling that will be deadly (“rasante”). Winter proves, then, who is virile enough to withstand the onslaught, creating the necessary characteristics of distinction and difference that define an elective community.

Laurent Jenny has argued that, throughout Caillois’s oeuvre, winter has a powerful value as an image, representing “une réponse imaginaire globale à une menace diffuse de dérégulation qui pèse sur la totalité de l’être.”<sup>44</sup> This imaginary response depends, in “Le Vent d’hiver,” on an articulation of a metaphorical winter (as opposed to the depiction of wintry practices based on sociological data or fieldwork). For if in several texts given at the Collège (such as his presentation on “La Fête”), Caillois cites and explains his anthropological references, the final

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<sup>42</sup> Mauss had analyzed winter in Eskimo societies as a time of religious exaltation (notably in his 1904 *Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés eskimos*), while Granet had studied the long feasts of winter in Chinese civilization (as in his *La Civilisation chinoise*).

<sup>43</sup> Laurent Jenny, “L’Hiver du sacré,” in *Roger Caillois: La pensée aventurée*, ed. Laurent Jenny (Paris: Belin, 1992), 195-214.

<sup>44</sup> Jenny, 197. Jenny argues that winter represents for Caillois his notion of the “lyrical ideogram,” an image that wields a powerful affective force.

pages of this essay lack such a typically scientific and rigorous approach.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Caillois leaves behind any analysis of history, politics, or economics in order to paint an essentially metaphorical picture of a society in decline. In his commentary on “Le Vent d’hiver,” Guillaume Bridet terms Caillois’s approach a “sociologie pour poète”: without the traditional analyses of underlying economic or class structures, Caillois insists on ideas and thought as the foundations of a spiritual community. But especially in “Le Vent d’hiver,” his approach could also be termed a “sociologie de poète” as much as “pour poète,” one in which metaphors are essential to the articulation of the idea that a decadent society can be the basis of a selective community.<sup>46</sup>

As the winter metaphor progresses, Caillois insists repeatedly on a lack of sound. For example, the winter winds “tuent les délicats, les malades et les oiseaux,” creating a “nettoyage muet” (352). This particular choice of victims begs interpretation: the weak or the sick could obviously stand in for the weakened society, but the choice of birds as the third group announces a theme of silence that will run through the conclusion. Those who brave the cold will have to prove themselves before “des oreilles sourdes aux chansons” (ibid.) The creation of this selective community depends upon the muting of false speech: the “beaux parleurs” become “silencieux”: “le champ est libre pour les plus aptes...nul gazouillis mélodieux et innombrable pour couvrir leur voix” (353). Language, then, must cease to be aesthetically beautiful: the song of the birds, the “gazouillis mélodieux,” the “beaux parleurs” must all fade into silence in order to give way to active and meaningful speech. If, for Bataille, the “existential secret society” can

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<sup>45</sup> So free is Caillois’s appropriation of his anthropological mentors that Tiina Arppe has argued that Caillois’s use of Granet is in particular “very tendentious” since he seems to invert Granet’s findings: in the schema outlined in *La Civilisation chinoise*, the peasant did not rush out to prove his virility; he stayed inside to amass his strengths. See Arppe’s “Sorcerer’s Apprentices and the ‘Will to Figuration’: The Ambiguous Heritage of the Collège de Sociologie,” *Theory Culture Society* 26.4 (2009): 134.

<sup>46</sup> Guillaume Bridet, “Roger Caillois dans les impasses du Collège de Sociologie,” *Littératures* 146 (June 2007): 90-103.

only take place in an absence of speech, Caillois's elective community can only in a context of hardened speech, one where melodious sounds give way to the voice of "les plus aptes." This represents to a certain degree Caillois bidding adieu on behalf of the avant-garde to literary aesthetics for the rigors of the scientific discourse. But there is a certain irony at work here: Caillois's own rejection of melodic or aesthetically beautiful speech comes in the midst of a carefully constructed, quasi-literary conclusion to the essay.

We can better see how Caillois intends to put this notion of silence and speech into play by looking at several key moments in the essay. As already established, Caillois traces here a history of individualism since the Romantic era, giving examples of both those who pursued individual liberty and those who made (however vain) attempts at forging community. But rather than analyze specific examples of such communities in the nineteenth century (be it the carbonari or the Freemasons), Caillois's examples are predominately drawn from the literary, philosophical, or artistic domains: Sade, Stirner, and Nietzsche are all given as examples of individualists who pushed their individual modes of expression to the extreme, while Baudelaire and Balzac are cited as artists who had envisaged a type of community. About the latter, Caillois remarks:

On ne soulignera jamais assez à quel point il importe que Balzac et Baudelaire aient regardé avec sympathie et proposé comme modèle Loyola et le *perinde ac cadaver* de la Compagnie de Jésus, le Vieux de la Montagne et ses Haschichins, à quel point l'un d'eux se soit plu à décrire les agissements d'une association mystérieuse au sein de la société contemporaine et l'autre à envisager la constitution d'une aristocratie nouvelle fondée sur une grâce mystérieuse qui ne serait ni le travail ni l'argent. (342-343)

For Caillois, Balzac and Baudelaire distinguish themselves from their Romantic predecessors because they attempt to create through literature models that took on the form of closed communities: Balzac's *Histoire des Treize* was inspired by Jesuits, and in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," Baudelaire admiringly refers to dandies as obeying a discipline comparable to Loyola's motto of *perinde ac cadaver* or the 12<sup>th</sup>-century hashishin order led by Hassan-I Sabbah, known as the Old Man of the Mountain.<sup>47</sup> The references to Balzac and Baudelaire were clearly of central importance to Caillois, as he drew on them again in his essay "Paris, mythe moderne," included in his 1938 book *Le mythe et l'homme*. In this essay, Caillois distinguishes between literature and myth by arguing that the former relates primarily to questions of individual style and taste, while the latter belongs to a community and has the potential to inspire communal action. The proof for Caillois that Baudelaire and Balzac attempted to fashion myths as opposed to just literature comes from the fact that nineteenth-century readers were inspired by and attempted to reenact the worlds that they portrayed.<sup>48</sup> In other words, by consistently bringing their writing back to reality, which they were able to change, Baudelaire and Balzac attain the status of myth.<sup>49</sup>

Yet Caillois's references to Baudelaire and Bataille demonstrate the highly focused optic through which he considers them: the *Comédie humaine* is effectively reduced to the three volumes of *Les Treize*, and Baudelaire is limited to a few pages from "Le Peintre de la vie

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<sup>47</sup> Literally "like a corpse," Loyola's motto *perinde ac cadaver* is meant to suggest the total discipline and obedience of the Jesuit to the pope. The hashishin order anticipated in many ways the initiatory practices of secret societies such as the Masons.

<sup>48</sup> Caillois mentions nineteenth-century reading circles that acted out the different characters of the *Comédie humaine*, including *Les Treize*.

<sup>49</sup> On the myth-literature distinction in "Paris, mythe moderne," see Claudine Frank's introduction to her translation of the essay in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 173-175; and Peter F. DeDomenico's "Revenge of the Novel: Roger Caillois's Literary Criticism in the Wake of the 1930s," *Romanic Review*, vol. 89.3 (1998): 381-410.



moderne.” Moreover, if Caillois expounds in other works on the specific importance of Baudelaire and Balzac to his theory of a literary sociology, the references in “Le Vent d’hiver” suffer a curious silent treatment, by which I mean that they are never identified. Caillois alludes to Balzac’s introduction to *L’Histoire des Treize* and to Baudelaire’s *Peintre de la vie moderne*, but the allusions (not to mention an explanation of Loyola and the Vieux de la Montagne) are never made manifest. While the influence of the secret society on these two authors can, in Caillois’s opinion, never be emphasized enough (“on ne soulignera jamais assez à quel point...”), it is the reader who is supposed to fill in the references, to draw on previous knowledge, to understand the Treize as the “mysterious association” in question and the dandies as the “new aristocracy.” If, following Martin Puchner, one of the performative aspects of the avant-garde manifesto as a text is that it fashions its readership through both what it says and does not say, the fact that the literary allusions in Caillois’s essay remain unexplored by its author demonstrates how he intends to create his own closed society through a specific system of references.<sup>50</sup> Given that the text is being published in the *NRF* – a primarily literary journal – the literary references, coupled with the absence of explicitly “scientific” or “sociological” references, can be understood as constructing a rhetorical framework through which Caillois seeks to forge his own closed society. Against the open readership of the journal, one that could conceivably be a vast group, Caillois’s series of allusions and references seek to define a more limited, defined community embodying the mysterious ideal of Baudelaire and Balzac, one that knows to take up their call to communal practices.

Caillois’s strategy can be explained in part by his stated desire in “Le vent d’hiver” to create a closed community, one whose limits are defined by a morality of difference and distinction. The types of closed communities Caillois cites as models – monastic orders,

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<sup>50</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*.

paramilitary organizations, and secret societies – are all defined by a pronounced separation from the society at large: “On y est distingué des autres et apparenté entre soi par un uniforme entier ou un imperceptible signe” (344). This distinction is accompanied by a profound disdain for the masses: Caillois speaks at one moment of the “multitude des misérables...à l’égard de qui il est juste and fondé d’éprouver du mépris” (340). For Caillois, the “morale de la communauté fermée” is defined by a strict ethic of honesty, contempt, love of power, and politeness; and this ethic is bracketed by two more literary references, an epigraph from Montherlant’s *Service inutile* and a praise of Baudelaire’s dandyism, all mentioned in a context of knowingness:

De fait, quand il faut manifester à quelqu’un son hostilité ou son mépris, il suffit, *comme on sait*, d’affecter à son égard une politesse excessive qui le gêne comme un blâme et exclut aussitôt toute familiarité. *On ne saurait oublier* à ce sujet la façon si caractéristique dont certains individualistes considérables, tel Baudelaire, devinant quelle arme implacable cachait une parfaite correction, ont fait du dandysme la forme privilégiée de l’héroïsme moderne. (351, emphasis added)

Politeness, then, can be used as a weapon, a form of distinction that separates its wielder from an object of disdain. If this position seems elitist, that is Caillois’s point: he long insisted on the purity and strength that the elite can represent.<sup>51</sup>

Allan Stoekl, in an essay exploring the evolution of Caillois’s theory of the elite, comments on the above passage by noting the odd use of “comme on sait”: Caillois asserts that his reader would already know that excessive politeness should be read as a mark of disdain.

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<sup>51</sup> This thinking would continue even after Caillois’s participation in the Collège de Sociologie, notably in his 1944 study *La Communion des forts*. The ambivalent political overtones in the 1930s and 1940s of Caillois’s praise of the elite as a virile, pure force have led more than one critic to accuse him of betraying fascist sympathies. For an overview of these criticisms, see Claudine Frank’s introduction to *The Edge of Surrealism*, and the commentary of Denis Hollier in “De l’équivoque.”

Stoekl underlines the general cultural presumption implied in such an off-the-cuff turn of phrase: as the French bourgeoisie is characterized by the notion of politeness as contempt (as opposed to, say, an American who believes politeness just connotes politeness), the fact that Caillois assumes it as a given – “comme on sait” – indicates for Stoekl the bourgeois assumptions underlining his own idea of an elite. If the elite is meant in Caillois’s essay to challenge bourgeois society, he still reproduces the underlying presumptions of the class.<sup>52</sup> This point on the persistence of cultural assumptions may very well be true, but I would argue that this presumption is precisely the point: it implies that Caillois’s reader already understands the moral of the community he wishes to forge. This is coupled with the expression “on ne saurait oublier...” which (much like the “on ne soulignera jamais assez...” in the preceding passage) implies that the reader already knows the particularities of Baudelaire’s dandyism and its relationship to politeness. Moreover, through recognition and identification with Baudelaire, Caillois attempts to make a mythical hero out of the intellectual who understands his reference: just as Baudelaire demonstrated the weaponry of excessive politeness, so the closed community can become a myth of resistance by setting itself off from the polluted masses. And it also implies that a community of readers can, in fact, be created. Whether or not that understanding is real, these turns of phrase muscle a sense of solidarity from the reader, effectively creating a community based on the impression of the distinction of shared knowledge. It becomes, then, the “imperceptible sign” that Caillois argues defines all closed communities.

As one of its main arguments, “Le Vent d’hiver” proposes striking equivalencies between different types of organizations: for Caillois, a paramilitary organization and an aesthetic elite are in essence the same type of community. In the aforementioned essay Stoekl sees in this a gesture

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<sup>52</sup> Allan Stoekl, “Caillois et l’élite: Avant et après la guerre,” in *Roger Caillois: fragments, fractures, réfractions d’une oeuvre*, ed. Annamaria Laserra (Padova: Unipress, 2002), 250-251.

of self-protection: by couching his call for military action in literary terms, Caillois protects himself from accusations of pure violence.<sup>53</sup> But the use of literary references to describe the closed society Caillois imagines is perhaps a surprising move, given his stated opposition to literature. Rather than articulate or define a society in purely scientific terms, Caillois instead aims to fashion a select elite out of the vast, open readership of the *NRF*, those readers able to understand without further explication his references and allusions. It is the ideal of a secret society in plain sight. In this sense, Caillois's equivalencies between literary and political communities represent a move that is just as aggressive as it is defensive, and in this way Caillois is proving himself a worthy student of the insect he studied, the praying mantis. For just as the mantis is able to camouflage itself to fit in with its environment, Caillois adapts here to his milieu, in this case the literary domain *NRF*. In an essay that defines literature as incapable of creating community, he nevertheless invokes literary references, epigraphs, and allusions to create an exclusive society based on the awareness of distinction and knowledge.

### Conclusion

The visions for the secret society contained in the three essays in "Pour un Collège de Sociologie" – Caillois's virile elite, Bataille's silent pact, Leiris's personal and linguistic experiences – all represent similar articulations of the relationship between language and silence. In many ways, the choice of the secret society by all three authors demonstrates how literature and politics in the 1930s had come to be defined by the desire to shift away from language and towards action. In both Caillois and Bataille's texts, the move towards the secret society implies a silencing of at least some form of speech: aesthetically beautiful speech for Caillois, contradictory political speech for Bataille. While Leiris recognizes how silence shapes a secret

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<sup>53</sup> Stoekl, "Caillois et l'élite," 250. Stoekl's reading grapples in part with the long history of the reception "Le Vent d'hiver," in which more than one critic has found fascist overtones, in particular with the line "Une société comme un organisme doit savoir éliminer ses déchets" (341).

society, he also demonstrates how it remains inscribed with both language and narrative. But this secret society of language ultimately remains highly individual, a first-person experience seemingly incapable of forging a larger community.

In his sole presentation before the Collège, “D’un langage sacré,” Jean Paulhan explored the political horizon of language by, much like Leiris, describing a personal experience of linguistic revelation. Or to be more precise, he narrates a personal failure at linguistic revelation, his attempt at understanding Malagasy proverbs while working as teacher in Madagascar. For Paulhan, the proverb encapsulates the difficulties of usage in everyday language: he initially has difficulty understanding the linguistic and cultural particularities contained in proverbs, but soon begins using them, without always knowing what exactly he is saying. He is, in other words, caught up by the power of language, much like Bataille’s sorcerer’s apprentice. But the moment of comprehension of a proverb is, for Paulhan, equivalent to the initiation into a secret society: “une société secrète assez singulière: elle ne se cache pas, elle opère en public, et ses mots de passe – à la différence des autres mots magiques – courent les rues” (703). The singularity of Paulhan’s secret society is precisely that it is not secret; the power of these sorts of words is precisely their everydayness. Sacred words are sacred to the extent that they escape our attention, an idea that Paulhan traces into the political realm, noting that “important” words in politics such as “democracy” or “freedom” or “order” are perhaps only powerful in so far as they pass unrecognized: “là où se montrent les ‘mots,’ il n’y a pas de pouvoir – mais là où il y a pouvoir, l’on ne remarque même pas les mots” (720). Words only have power when they do not show themselves.

In this sense, the distinct and opposing uses of the term “secret society” in each of the three essays contained in “Pour un Collège de Sociologie” effectively complicates the power that

each member hopes to give to the term. Through the multiple and sometimes conflicting uses of the term and the concept, the text ultimately fails at presenting a unified or cohesive vision for the Collège's activities. This is perhaps a necessary failure, for the movement from silence to text offers the possibility of interpretation, and of conflicting interpretations. But, Paulhan would suggest, this is perhaps a fitting conclusion: for him, sacred language is any language that occasions a misuse, a failure of comprehension. So if the end result of the manifesto is a sense of unease at the differing definitions and representations of the secret society, or of suspicion that the Collège's members have been unable to create a unified front, it is perhaps because, for them, the secret society touches most profoundly at the nature of the sacred, and thus necessitates the use of a sacred language ultimately destined for failure.

## CONCLUSION

The interwar period, as we have seen, witnessed a widespread literary proliferation of conspiracies and secret societies, a phenomenon owed in part to the historical and political context in which these texts emerged. This does not mean, however, that narratives of secret societies and conspiracies completely disappeared with the entry of France into World War II, and in what follows, I would like to suggest how the representation of such groups in many ways anticipated and prepared the discourses of paranoia, suspicion, and betrayal that emerged after 1940. One of the primary functions of narratives of conspiracy among politically engaged writers of the interwar period was to articulate narratives for the troubles of the time period, to seek out the hidden causes for incomprehensible human events. Particularly for fascist writers, these conspiratorial narratives took shape within a larger story of decadence, articulating the cause for the perceived decline of the French nation. With the start of World War II, this perceived image of decadence became a historical reality of disaster. The collapse of the French military against German forces in June 1940 led to the end of the Third Republic, with half of France under German occupation and the other half a nominally independent state with Vichy as its capital and headed by World War I hero Marshall Philippe Pétain. This regime change was not the result of a conspiracy: as Julian Jackson has demonstrated, the Fall of France was due entirely to a military failure on the part of a French army and government unable to adapt to new strategies of war adopted by Hitler's forces. Nor did the change in government represent a coup d'état in the traditional sense of the term, as Pétain's assumption of power came from a legislative vote held on July 10, 1940, in the immediate aftermath of the humiliating military collapse.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Jackson's *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

If Vichy did not represent the triumph of a conspiracy or a coup, it nevertheless engendered new narratives that sought to come to terms with the historical enormity of the loss, many of which took on the rhetoric of conspiracy and scapegoating that had shaped literary and cultural discourses of the interwar period. In political tracts bearing titles like *Dieu a-t-il puni la France?* (1941), the recent past was again scoured to uproot the cause of decline, but rather than the political tumult of the 1930s, the focus was on the collapse of France.<sup>2</sup> One of the most popular narratives on the right, the myth of decadence, advanced the thesis that France's strength had been weakened by a decades-long rejection of the cultural and political heritage of the French nation, an undermining abetted by communists, Jews, and Masons. As historians have shown, the scapegoating myths of decadence that emerged out of the Fall of France represent in many ways a continuation of previous discourses that attempted to identify the enemy within France, given now a new historical significance.<sup>3</sup>

The narratives explaining the defeat of France thus draw on the discourses of decline that writers such as Drieu and Céline advanced in the late 1930s, using the myth of the Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik plot to cast the nation and literature as the victim of a vast conspiracy. But rather than the fictional fascist revolutionary cell that Drieu portrays in the final pages of *Gilles*, the actual response to this perceived conspiracy came through the full oppressive force of the French state. In particular, laws targeting Masons and Jews became an integral part of Vichy's authoritarian platform. Freemasons were considered an enemy of the state in Hitler's Germany, which saw them as an ally of the English; and in Vichy's search for the source of the French defeat, the new regime also targeted this particular secret society, which was perceived as

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<sup>2</sup> Julian Jackson cites a number of these tracts in the introduction to *The Fall of France*.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); and Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).



exemplifying the problems of the Third Republic. An August 1940 law outlawed secret societies, banning Freemasonry and forcing government workers to declare their membership, in the process creating a new anti-Masonic service aided by Nazi Germany and headed by Bernard Faÿ. A professor at the Collège de France and the director of the Bibliothèque Nationale during the German Occupation, Faÿ had published in 1935 a history of eighteenth-century Freemasonry which, although not going so far as to argue that the French Revolution had been the product of an outright conspiracy, suggested that Masons had intellectually and culturally prepared the event. In the new reality of wartime France, Faÿ's historical obsession became an actual weapon of oppression, as the Bureau des sociétés secrètes published the names of individual Masons and deported thousands of their numbers to death camps.<sup>4</sup>

The anti-Jewish policies of the French State went even farther than its anti-Masonic platform. The October 3, 1940, Jewish Statute, enacted without any instigation from the German Occupying forces, stripped Jews of their status as citizens of the French State and prohibited them from holding high public office and positions in fields such as education, media, and theater. In its implicit accusation that Jews were capable of malevolently influencing public opinion, the spirit behind the law can be traced back in part to the suspicions of the interwar period that a secret Jewish plot was the force behind the Popular Front government and the general decline of France. Throughout 1941 and 1942 the claim that Jews were enemies of the state was used as justification by the French government and police for a series of arrests and roundups that led to the interning of thousands of Jews in various concentration camps, the most notorious of which was the Drancy camp outside of Paris. By the end of the Occupation in 1944, over 76,000 Jews had been deported to death camps in Germany, the vast majority of whom

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<sup>4</sup> See Antoine Compagnon, *Le Cas Bernard Faÿ: Du collège de France à l'indignité nationale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009). On the persecution of Freemasonry in Vichy, see Jackson's *France: The Dark Years*, 150-151 and 198-199.

died, including writers such as Max Jacob and Irène Némirovsky. As Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton have shown, the persecution of the Jews in France during the Vichy years aided and abetted the Nazis' own anti-Jewish policies but were not imposed from the outside. Instead, the French anti-Jewish laws were energetically pursued by the government as a response to the "Jewish problem" in France, a culmination of the climate of anti-Semitism and xenophobia that had been brewing since the beginning of the Great Depression, a replaying of the conflicts at work in the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of the anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic programs of the Vichy regime, in other words, represented in part a political response to the fears of the Judeo-Masonic plot, the triumph of the narrative of resistance to the internationalist Jewish conspiracy described by Céline, Drieu, and many others, one that now had the full force of the French State behind it. The cultural terrain had been amply prepared for a historical and political oppression of the perceived foes of the French State: not the German Occupiers, but the enemies within.

The role of writers and intellectuals was also subjected to much scrutiny in the aftermath of the defeat of France. The search for scapegoats included attacks targeting "immoral" and "decadent" writers like Proust, Gide, and Cocteau, with their shared trait of homosexuality serving as a shorthand for the accusation that France's decline had come from a turn away from the traditions of family and nation.<sup>6</sup> The narrative of sexual subversion that Proust and Gide had wrestled with almost twenty years prior returned with gusto in the wake of the collapse of

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<sup>5</sup> See Marrus and Paxton's *Vichy France and the Jews*. See as well Jackson's *France: The Dark Years*, 355-360. Hannah Arendt famously refers to the Dreyfus Affair as a "dress rehearsal" for the government-sponsored anti-Semitic oppression and genocide of World War II. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Jackson comments on a 1941 political cartoon that shows two defeated French peasants being lectured by another, who says to them, "Que voulez-vous? Vous faisiez vos délices de Proust, de Gide, de Cocteau!" Jackson also mentions a number of titles of what he calls the "literature of self-flagellation" that came out of the Fall of France. See *The Fall of France*, 3-4.

France, providing an explanation for Germany's victory. As Gisèle Sapiro has argued, the debate over the role and responsibility of intellectuals in the defeat of France represented in many ways a continuation of moralizing discourses targeting writers as "mauvais maîtres" or "ennemis publics" that existed long before 1940 but which took on a new significance in the wake of the humiliation of the defeat. If writers came to be seen as bearing responsibility for France's defeat, it is because there was a longstanding history of attacking certain groups of writers from Gide and Proust to the surrealists as immoralists, traitors, or enemies of the state.<sup>7</sup> As I have argued, the representation of secret societies and conspiracies throughout the interwar period can be seen as playing a role in this development, as it helped delineate an explicitly political and cultural role for literature and define literature through its practices. As a model that posed literature in terms of inclusion and exclusion, of devotion and solidarity, the secret society helped shape the notion of the writer as politically active and responsible, a legacy that would come to have a new meaning when writers were seen as bearing the responsibility for the defeat of France, or were forced to choose sides between collaboration and resistance.

This sense of responsibility and of moral reckoning is made abundantly clear in one text that explicitly evokes secret societies as a response to the 1940 Fall of France and the resulting German Occupation: Henry de Montherlant's 1941 collection of essays *Solstice de juin*.<sup>8</sup> *Solstice* has become one of the more infamous texts of Occupation-era France: while not betraying the outright pro-German fervor or anti-Semitism of some of his peers, Montherlant nevertheless appears at certain moments to make an apology for the German victors, looking with pity and disdain on the new France. The eponymous essay, for example, describes the

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<sup>7</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), in particular chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Henri de Montherlant, *Solstice de juin*, in *Essais*, ed. Pierre Sipriot (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). Page references given parenthetically with the abbreviation *SJ*.

decline of France in terms of a natural phenomenon, the sunset of one civilization turning inevitably to the rising of another. The collapse of France should thus not be understood in terms of tragedy, Montherlant seems to suggest, but in terms of fate. And in one particularly notorious essay, “Les Chenilles,” the French army is implicitly compared to a line of caterpillars upon which a soldier who has participated in the 1940 war urinates. After the Liberation, this moralizing and condescending attitude toward the freshly defeated French nation and its triumphant German occupiers would appear shocking enough to earn Montherlant condemnation from one of the Purge committees.<sup>9</sup>

The opening text of *Le Solstice de juin* demonstrates how one secret society serves as a compelling figure for understanding the collapse of France. In a memoir-essay entitled “Les Chevaleries,” written in July 1940, Montherlant recounts how he and four of his young friends founded in 1919 a secret society known as “l’Ordre,” what he describes as “une société un peu codifiée et un peu âpre” (*SJ*, 857). Taking inspiration from medieval knights, Japanese samurai, and French Jansenists, the Order posed a code of moral strength and solidarity in response to the disordered and “abject” world of postwar France. The group was marked less by exterior symbols and rituals than by an internal devotion, what Maurice Blanchot identifies as an “ethic of insolence,” a sense of superiority that constantly pushes against custom and convention.<sup>10</sup> For Montherlant, the Order was defined by the “orgueil” of its “acte de séparation” (*SJ*, 859), the dedication to its “pacte de solidarité” (*SJ*, 861), and the respect for its “morale pratique” (*SJ*, 862). The group’s members conceived of it as an ideal of mutual support, a union that stood

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<sup>9</sup> On the scandal of *Solstice*, see Pierre Sipriot, *Montherlant sans masque*, vol. 2 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992), 184-195; and chapter 1 of Richard J. Golsan’s *French Writers and the Politics of Complicity: Crises of Democracy in the 1940s and 1990s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> See Blanchot’s review of *Solstice de juin*, “De l’insolence considérée comme l’un des beaux-arts,” in *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

apart from the immoral and disordered life around them, but this internal solidarity was shaped in part by a disdain and hostility to those who did not figure among its ranks.

Montherlant's portrayal of this youthful secret society recalls many of the defining characteristics of such groups that have been at issue throughout this dissertation, particularly in its definition of the moral strength and internal force.<sup>11</sup> As a group founded in 1919 and lasting just ten months, the Order could be seen as prefiguring the search for community that inspired many of the writers I have studied in the preceding chapters, appearing almost like the first instance of the seduction of the secret society. And "seduction" understood in the fullest sense of the term: although he never explicitly says as much, the Order was a society of "pederasts" (Montherlant's preferred term for the same-sex mentoring relationships that he pursued) that Montherlant founded with his friend Roger Peyrefitte, referred to in the text simply as "P."<sup>12</sup> In this respect, we come back full circle to Proust, Gide, and the sexual secret societies of chapter 2, and yet the sense of historical import that the Fall of France has created leads Montherlant to insist upon history in a way that Proust and Gide do not.

Throughout the essay, Montherlant makes it clear that his look back at his youthful endeavor is not done simply for the sake of nostalgia, or even as a historical commentary, but also as a means of commenting on the new world of 1940. For example, at the start of his account, Montherlant evokes both his past interest in athletics and the present political situation to explain why he has never analyzed the group before this essay:

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<sup>11</sup> The similarities between Montherlant's essay and the secret societies of Jules Romains's *Recherche d'une église* were evident at the time to Roger Caillois, who briefly compares them in his 1944 essay "Préambule pour l'*Esprit des sectes*," published in *Approches de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> See Golsan's *French Writers and the Politics of Complicity*, where the relationship between Montherlant's pederasty and collaborationism is explored in detail.

Je n'ai jamais évoqué sur le papier ce petit mouvement, parce qu'assez tôt je le détournai, et en fis autre chose: en le mêlant, dans mes écrits, à cette 'autre chose'—qui fut l'esprit du stade, j'aurais embrouillé tout... Mais comme nous voici de nouveau au terme d'une guerre, je reprends intérêt à ce mince remous que fit l'autre en s'enfonçant. (*SJ*, 857)

The end of one war necessitates a return to the previous one, but Montherlant's use of this memory remains ambiguous: is the Order evoked as a potential response to the German Occupation, a symbol of moral resistance to the disorder of the new world? Or does its image of moral rectitude and severity resonate with the rhetoric that Vichy advanced in the wake of the defeat? Further on, Montherlant refers to a "sublime image" of the Order, recalling how even after its dissolution, members could still call upon each other for help, with his characterization of this image recalling the solstice that gives the collection its title: "L'Ordre était mort, et il jeta encore un long rayon de soleil couché" (*SJ*, 868). If the "solstice de juin" can be read as representing the turning of civilizations, from France's decline to Germany's triumph, the Order's "long rayon de soleil couché" can, by analogy, seem to suggest the decline of France, with its evocation in 1940 justifying the need for a new Order, one that Vichy might exemplify.<sup>13</sup> And yet Montherlant also suggests several pages later that the groups of soldiers "de la Somme à Compiègne" also resemble orders of knights, commenting allusively that "Et je me dis que, s'il y avait eu en France davantage de ces petits groupes..." (*SJ*, 871).

The ambiguity of Montherlant's essay, and of the entirety of *Solstice de juin*, has been borne out by the reception of the work, seen by its critics as a document of collaborationism and by its defenders as a testimony to the elitist and disdainful attitude that Montherlant had

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman has offered such an interpretation of the solar imagery of *Solstice de juin* in his essay "Blanchot at *Combat*," in *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983).

expressed long before the Occupation.<sup>14</sup> Montherlant alludes to the possibility of multiple readings in the concluding sentences of his essay:

J'ai dit en commençant que l'Ordre naquit par réaction contre une société qui nous apparaissait abjecte. Nombreux sont donc ceux qui penseront qu'une évocation de l'Ordre n'est pas à sa place dans la France nouvelle. D'autres penseront qu'elle a peut-être sa place, dans une nation humiliée. D'autres penseront qu'il y a là un accent et un langage d'un autre monde, dont il n'y a aucune chance – à espérer ou à craindre – qu'ils puissent être entendus aujourd'hui. (*SJ*, 872)

Just one short month after the Fall of France, Montherlant seems almost to be hedging his bets: “some” will see this short sketch as inappropriate, “others” as appropriate, and yet he never explicitly indicates why either one group or the other would find his portrayal objectionable. This conclusion may try to suspend the historical judgment, but its ultimate effect is to show how the enormity of the events of 1940 have immediately imposed new meanings and historical imperatives onto the representation of secret societies and conspiracies. What was in the 1930s a politically charged discourse becomes in the wake of the war a scandal, or a necessity. Thus when Montherlant suggests that some will believe that this text has “an accent and a language from another world,” he is not incorrect: he demonstrates an awareness of the impossibility of reading a text from July 1940 about a moral order without attempting to assign to it meanings tied to the defeat and the Occupation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For the reactions to *Solstice de juin*, see both Sipriot's *Montherlant sans masque* and Golsan's *French Writers and the Politics of Complicity*.

<sup>15</sup> Blanchot goes so far as to suggest that Montherlant loses his attitude of insolence by becoming involved in the historical and political circumstances of his time, demonstrating instead “une idéologie qui semble à peine supérieure aux méditations habituelles des écrivains perdus dans la politique.” See *Faux pas*, 352.

Beyond the narratives of scapegoating and decline that marked the defeat of France, the imposition of an authoritarian regime and the presence of a foreign power created an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion that pervaded the Vichy era, but the rhetoric and discourse surrounding it had already been well prepared by several years of cultural obsession with conspiracies and secret societies. As Frédéric Monier notes, when opponents of Vichy France suggested that the new government had been imposed upon the French people not only through force but also through a politics of “silence, fear, and ruse,” they drew on themes endemic to conspiratorial narratives throughout the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> Just as the debate over the writer’s responsibility took on a new imperative under the Occupation, the historical reality of the Vichy regime also colors representations of secret societies and conspiracies after 1939. The “figure du complot” that Monier refers to finds deep resonance with not only the new regime of Vichy, but also the military occupation by Nazi Germany and the clandestine activities of the Resistance, inevitably shaping interpretations of narratives of conspiracy.

In one example, Marcel Aymé’s absurdist *Travelingue* (written in 1941), a standard depiction of the petty divisiveness of the bourgeoisie in the Popular Front era takes on a more contemporary resonance when the novel reveals that the real source of power in 1930s France is, in fact, a barber. Aymé’s novel has often been read as a sign of its author’s collaborationist inclinations, in part due to his decision to serialize the novel in the right-wing newspaper *Je suis partout*, as well as to anti-Semitic opinions expressed by one of the characters. In addition, *Travelingue*’s conspiratorial revelation that the real source of power is a mysterious barber, called at one point “l’un des hommes les plus influents du jour” to whom numerous government officials come seek advice, would seem to join up with right-wing discourses of the late 1930s

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<sup>16</sup> As Monier puts it, “si la chute de la IIIe République n’est pas le fruit d’une conspiration, si le vote du 10 juillet 1940 n’est pas un coup d’Etat, leur mémoire vécue fait surgir la figure du complot.” See *Le Complot dans la République: Stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 322.



that suggested that the Popular Front was the front for a revolutionary conspiracy.<sup>17</sup> Yet the multiplicity of points of view in the novel obfuscates any easy readings: the critiques of the bourgeoisie under the Popular Front are all advanced by right-wing characters in the novel, who are also often portrayed as imbeciles. And the historical context has also changed: the barber's anti-republican discourses near the end of the novel, in which he stresses the national mission of France and welcomes war as a remedy to the troubles of the 1930s, often seem to bear a resemblance to the rhetoric of Vichy's authoritarian regime.<sup>18</sup> In other words, conspiratorial narratives of wartime literature resonate so deeply with the political reality of an occupied nation and a new government that certain historical readings seem almost inevitable.

If conspiracies and secret societies lived on in literature after 1940 as narratives of defeat and Occupation, the same cannot be said for the avant-garde's willing embrace of the secret society model as practice of literature. Although the political and literary Resistance had to adopt clandestine practices for circulating texts, this was an imposition rather than a choice: Vichy's policies of censorship and persecution meant that opponents of the regime had to operate under secrecy. But the avant-garde in essence disappeared, as Vichy's oppressive regime forced many revolutionary writers into exile or silence. In this sense, the dissolution of the Collège de Sociologie in 1939 provides a fitting culmination to the story of secret societies and conspiracies in interwar French literature. Amid an increasingly violent political situation, the Collège, which had posed the model of the closed society as a potential response to a bellicose and crisis-ridden time, ultimately chose the path of suspension rather than of contraction. Roger Caillois had already left for Argentina at the invitation of the intellectual and writer Victoria Ocampo;

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<sup>17</sup> Marcel Aymé, *Travelingue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 101. Aymé was censured after the war for publishing in *Je suis partout*.

<sup>18</sup> Dieter Müller makes this argument in his *Discours réaliste et discours satirique: L'écriture dans les romans politiques de Marcel Aymé* (Paris: Champion, 1993).

what was originally intended as a short trip of a few weeks became in the aftermath of the war an extended exile that lasted until 1944. Michel Leiris, already reticent about the group's project, would write to Bataille to withdraw from the group to focus on his work at the Musée de l'homme and his own writing. In the midst of this internal dissension and dispersion, Bataille officially suspended the secret society of the Collège at the end of its spring 1939 term.<sup>19</sup>

The disbanding of the Collège thus represents a fitting symbolic end to the interwar period's intellectual and literary fascination with secret societies and conspiracies. The group had attempted to create a critical language to analyze, discuss, and ultimately adopt conspiratorial social formations in the hopes of radically effecting change in an increasingly turbulent and violent political landscape. These efforts at defining a language and practice for intellectual action inevitably had to confront the ambivalent meanings running through the flirtation with the secret society model: the enclosed rituals of Bataille's "existential secret society" could not ultimately be reconciled with the "conspiratorial society" imagined by Caillois, the competing notions betraying the same definitional conflicts that Breton had encountered in outlining his own secret mission for surrealism. As a myth, the secret society had proven seductive because it exemplified an ideal of efficiency of action, whatever its shape and definition, and yet neither the existential nor the conspiratorial model were able to stave off the onset of war. Instead, the clandestine politics of the Resistance came to replace by historical necessity the ideal of a subversive avant-garde; the idea of an intellectual secret society as a response to historical events became a lost dream in the wake of history's violent unfolding.

After the war, the imposition of history onto the notion of the avant-garde as a secret society was demonstrated with great force in one of the most enduring and famous criticisms of

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<sup>19</sup> For the story of the Collège's dissolution, see Denis Hollier's introduction to *Le Collège de Sociologie, 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995); as well as Claudine Frank's introduction to *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

surrealism, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* In the fourth section of his text, entitled "Situation de l'écrivain en 1947," Sartre argues for the notion of a politically and socially committed writer by turning back to and ultimately rejecting previous models of literature in the twentieth century, with surrealism receiving a particularly harsh treatment. Sartre's critique of surrealism insists on the negative tendencies of the group, arguing in essence that it is only interested in the destruction of the bourgeois world while unable to create any real notion of political engagement or *praxis*. Whereas Breton had seen his group's avant-garde practices as revolutionary, destroying bourgeois society in order to arrive at a new reality, Sartre sees only violence. In Sartre's view, surrealism remains focused on the imagination, only offering critique and destruction, rather than a truly creative and constructive endeavor.<sup>20</sup>

Sartre's criticism of surrealism is primarily philosophical in nature, but he offers a historical and political dimension by returning to the secret society model that the avant-garde had actively invoked throughout the interwar period. Within the new landscape of postwar literature that Sartre defines, the secret society becomes a symbol not only of the group's misguided aesthetics but also of its failed politics. Sartre claims that the surrealists' readership was only made up of members of the bourgeoisie, thereby proving their ultimate failure at creating a revolutionary movement within literature. Thus, he asserts, the group can essentially be characterized by what he terms its "aspect ambigu de chapelle littéraire, de collège spirituel, d'église et de société secrète" (*Q*, 195). In this, Sartre recalls criticisms of the group as a pastime for the bourgeoisie, but he goes further by citing a number of secret societies that offer through analogy a damning portrayal of the politics of surrealism. While speaking of the group's

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<sup>20</sup> See Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). References given parenthetically with the abbreviation *Q*. On Sartre's critique of surrealism, see Michel Beaujour, "Sartre and Surrealism," *Yale French Studies*, no. 30 (1963): 86-95; Dominick LaCapra, *A Preface to Sartre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 83-86; and Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 277-299.

tendency towards violence, he argues that the best that surrealists can hope for is to “se constituer en association punitive et clandestine sur le modèle du Ku-Klux-Klan” (*Q*, 191). The comparison between surrealism and the American secret society is striking: it suggests not only that surrealism is violent or “punitive,” but that it has a certain reactionary politics, with the racist ideology of the Ku-Klux-Klan finding a troubling echo within a Europe just beginning to come to terms with the Nazis’ programs of racial extermination. Sartre makes his political attack on surrealism even more clear in two footnotes in which he suggests French variants on the accusation that the group is a violent, reactionary secret society. There, he suggests a resemblance – “purement formelle mais troublante” – between surrealism and l’Action française, Charles Maurras’ prewar rightwing group, claiming that both share a desire to make violence a method of thought, an argument he develops by repeating Maurras’ declaration that the group wasn’t a party but a “conspiracy” (*Q*, 295).

The rhetorical move of dismantling surrealism’s leftist credentials by associating the group with organizations like the Ku-Klux-Klan and l’Action française is a powerful historical gesture: it effectively places surrealism on the wrong side of postwar politics, putting it in the same category as one of the forebears of fascism in France. Sartre later repeats that assertion in the essay, when he compares the surrealists to Drieu la Rochelle and his novel *Gilles*, calling the fascist writer the “frère ennemi” of the avant-garde. For Sartre, Drieu and the surrealists not only represent an incorrect politics, but an incorrect practice of literature, one based on an isolation of the writer from his public and his time: “L’un et l’autre sont des clercs, l’un et l’autre s’allient au temporel avec innocence et désintéressement” (*Q*, 197). In forging his comparisons between surrealism as a secret society and Drieu as a violent, isolated writer, Sartre draws on the rhetoric of political engagement that was at issue throughout representations of conspiracies and secret

societies in the interwar period. But as Sartre's argumentation makes clear, the historical context has changed, making the secret society model of literature appear on the wrong side of history, a relic of another era.<sup>21</sup>

Sartre's critique of surrealism highlights many of the elements of the discourse on secret societies and conspiracies that I have analyzed throughout this dissertation, and also serves to underline the particularity of the interwar period's fascination with these social forms. In the 1930s, the surrealists and the Collège de Sociologie embraced the model of the secret society because it represented a myth of politics and action. The closed circle of intellectuals was seen as a response to the individualism and division of bourgeois society, and the secret society model had appealed because it offered multiple meanings, from initiation and solidarity to efficiency and exclusion. But as Sartre's critique makes clear, the avant-garde's embrace of secret societies represents a problematic model for defining the practice of literature, one whose ambivalences would continue to have significant ramifications beyond the end of the interwar years. In Sartre's postwar vision, the secret society model no longer represents revolution, just violence; it cannot construct a new reality, only destroy; it is incapable of political commitment, offering nothing but conspiratorial designs. Sartre's critique can thus be seen as the closure of one chapter of the story of the secret society of literature, one that also marks the end of the interwar period and the start of the postwar era.

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<sup>21</sup> As Martin Jay has argued, this critique of surrealism by Sartre would prove enduring: until the arrival of the situationists in the 1960s, surrealism was essentially abandoned by intellectuals on the left. See his *Marxism and Totality*, 292-293. On the afterlife of surrealism, see Susan R. Suleiman's article "As Is" in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1011-1018, as well as her *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

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